BEING THE GUEST

A Journey to the Heart of Mevlana

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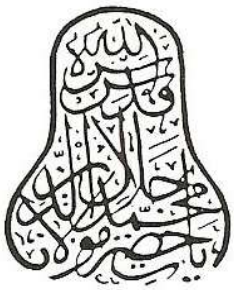

Being the Guest: A Journey to the Heart of Mevlana

Come, come, you will never find a friend like me.
Where's a Beloved like me in all the world?
Come, don't waste your life running back and forth.
You are like a dry valley, I am the rain.
You are a city laid waste, I am the architect.
Come!

-Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi

It was raining when we arrived at Istanbul that December Sunday night. The group gathered at the airport, and we were bused to our hotel in the older section of Istanbul, getting there around midnight. We had flown out of JFK in New York on Saturday evening on Yugoslav Airlines about 7:00 and it was now nearly 24 hours later. We had spent the day in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. While others in our group met with local folks to do zikr (vocal invocational prayer), we had opted for an afternoon of sleep in a local – and darkly dismal – hotel.

Now it was late, and we were more than tired. The hotel was in a very narrow side street, picturesquely overlooking an empty lot filled with the rubble of whatever structure it had once housed, as well as a pungent accumulation of local garbage. Inside the hotel, it was obvious that it had been recently redecorated, as the attractive interiors were in sharp contrast to the locale. However, the elevators didn't work. My mother required a crutch to walk, due to two previously-broken hips, so we struggled upstairs to our rooms, climbing a narrow, marble, spiral stairway – very pretty, but very hazardous.

The next morning we awakened to the call to prayer, as we did each succeeding morning of our time in Turkey. Following our morning practices, we went to breakfast, learning our first – and most important – Turkish words: "tesekur ederum" meaning "thank you." Unfortunately, my grasp of Turkish is still largely limited to these two words.

Since Gretchen and I were both exhausted by grueling work schedules in the weeks and days just preceding our departure – as well as by the long flight – we slept in on Monday while others began touring local sights. By Monday evening, restored to humanity, we gathered with the others on the tour to visit the Helveti tekke. Mother came along, as we once again threaded narrow streets, parking a couple of blocks from our destination.

As we arrived at the tekke, we were welcomed and asked to avoid stepping on the carpet at the door before removing our shoes. A tekke is the same as a mosque, so one must enter without shoes, with hair covered. We gathered on the floor in the main area of the tekke (semahane). It was magnificent, with beautiful carpets, and an incredible chandelier descending from the center of the ceiling which arched up to a round design which reminded me of looking at the inside of a shaykh's sekke or camel's hair hat. Exquisite green crystal chandeliers also graced the room, and the sekkes of many generations of shaykhs were displayed in glass cabinets. Upstairs, overlooking the room was a balcony with a lattice screen, where the women sit and pray during ceremonies.

Opening directly off the main room was the "Music Room," behind glass French doors. In this room we could see that a group of men were gathered, drinking tea and smoking. After a while, the men in our group were invited to join the other men, while the women were invited to go upstairs if they wished to smoke. Since my mother was a smoker, we went upstairs. The women were gathered in two tiny rooms off the balcony area, smoking and drinking tea. They were very warm and gracious, although none spoke any English. However, sign language worked, accompanied by many smiles and bows.

A little later, the women from our group were invited to join the men in the Music Room, as music practice was about to begin. We were placed along the wall, on cushions, on one side of the room. About 24 of our group were present. The room was already filled with men, and more came in throughout the evening. Because the room was not all that large, people were increasingly scrunched together in order to fit in. Some of the Americans, however, were unwilling to scrunch, and took up luxurious amounts of space. No one said a word, of course. We were provided with tea and ashtrays, as the cloud of smoke thickened.

When the evening's program began, all the men present stood up. The women from our group stood as well, but one of the tea servers indicated rather urgently to me that women were not to stand. I did my best to communicate this to the women in the group, some of whom chose to ignore me. An attitude was already beginning to emerge in the group which I would characterize as "We are the guests – therefore, we can do no wrong; we are exempt from local courtesies and customs if we don't feel like observing them."

The dervishes then began what was clearly a session of music practice. Because the dervish orders were illegal in Turkey, the only way they could preserve their traditional expressions of worship is through public "performances" – a folklore-type presentation of what is in reality an act of spiritual devotion. In order to practice for these performances, they are allowed to meet in the music room of the tekke, which belongs to the government as a museum. So here we were at "music practice." They sang many songs throughout the evening, referring to sheet music. Different instruments were added as new arrivals came in. The shaykh sat on the floor leading the practice, surrounded by the dervishes, with the caliph (like a sergeant-at-arms) – an awesome

presence himself – sitting directly behind and above the shaykh, with legs crossed. He kept a very sharp eye on all happenings in the room, directing others as needed.

During a break, we were served fresh fruit and Hobbies, a chocolate candy, as well as the ubiquitous tea. Throughout the break, the men leading our group were standing and talking among themselves with their backs to the shaykh who was still sitting on the floor. They were oblivious to the fact that all of the Helveti dervishes were seated – and noticing the Americans, without staring. The caliph was in a curious state of restrained agitation. The American men were violating courtesy in two ways: they had their backs to the shaykh, and they were standing in his presence while he was seated. Yet they were guests, so the caliph could not directly question their behavior.

I noticed his distress. He signaled me that all should sit. When I indicated the group of men, he raised his hands in a gesture of despair. I then went over and asked them to sit, explaining why it was necessary. They responded, but seemed to think it was really *un*necessary. By this time, I was beginning to understand why Reshad advised me to remain somewhat detached and disassociated from this group. When I later requested that the leaders take some time to teach the group basic courtesies, so that we could be good guests and not unknowingly offend our hosts, my request was seen as irrelevant.

Following the break, while music practice continued, in the main room a group of young dancers also gathered to practice the turn. Some were clothed in the turquoise outfits that indicated they were beginners. It was wonderful to watch and listen to these dervishes as they practiced the arts of devotion to God that had been practiced within the walls of this tekke for many generations. As the evening wore on, the room became very full. Suddenly, all the men shifted position so that they were sitting on their folded legs, backs erect. It was time for zikr.

We all shared in the zikr for the next 45 minutes or so, breathing together the breath of God. It was very intense, as there were by now about 125 people packed into the room. The zikr involved (seated) body movement as well as sound and breath. The energy grew more passionate, as the caliph signaled first this man, and then that one, to attend to dervishes who were entering into ecstatic states. In this presence, in this company, we had clearly arrived into the heart of Turkish Sufism. The tekke, the dervishes, the zikr all combined to bring us into a timeless world far different from the America we had left less than 48 hours before.

As the zikr came to a close, I could understand why men and women are usually separated, although my feelings were mixed about it. I was very grateful to have been in the room with the men, a direct participant. Yet the opening power of the zikr had been very great, and many of the men present were young. I could well imagine that a room full of young men and women, immersed in such intensity of feeling as opened up during the zikr itself, could result in a sea of sexual energy that would subvert the passion from God to person. Yet at the same time, I felt

sorrow for the women who were far away, upstairs, behind the screen, far from the shaykh – more distant observers than participants.

The evening, which had now continued about three hours beyond the time we had been given for departure, moved into a new phase as the shaykh made himself available for questions. Another hour was spent as he responded with stories to questions posed by the group, as well as his explication of a complicated dream that Coleman Barks shared with him. When one of the women in our group asked why the Turkish women were excluded from the zikr, he answered with something in Turkish that made all the men roar with laughter. The translator, blushing, said nothing – so it was quite clear that cultural attitudes toward women were present, even in the tekke. Nevertheless, it had been a truly wonderful evening, and we went back to the hotel quite filled with the richness we had experienced.

Tuesday, I awoke determined to make contact with Madame Ayasli. Reshad had recommended that I meet her while in Istanbul, and we were leaving early Thursday morning. Madame Ayasli was the aunt of Reshad's teacher, Bulent. Reshad had written of her and her house on the Bosphorous in The Last Barrier. I enlisted the help of the desk clerk to check with information for a phone number for her. He gave me a number and connected me. After speaking to two other women, who did not understand English, she finally came on the line. Speaking very rapidly, she said she was very glad that I was in Istanbul and that she would be meeting with the whole group tomorrow (Wednesday) at 4:00 – and then hung up, before I could say another word! I was confused – meeting with *my* group the next day at 4:00? Where? No one had said anything about such a meeting. The others had already gone out, and I didn't want to be rude by calling back and asking her to explain herself. So I let it go, and Mother and Gretchen and I went off to the Grand Bazaar.

We enjoyed our shopping expedition, as well as lunch out, and then came back to the hotel, still tired from jet lag. The whole group was to meet at dinner time to do some sort of group bonding ritual under the guidance of Qahira, the "spiritual" leader of the group. However, the evening was nothing more than eating in the same room, as the hotel provided the evening meal – the first of many truly awful tour-provided dinners (my mother referred to it as the 'bread and water' diet). There was no interaction or introduction of group members to one another except as we happened to sit nearby during the meal. The group energy clearly was not coming together in any kind of cohesive fashion.

By Wednesday, I knew for sure that Madam Ayasli was completely unknown to our group, let alone meeting with us at 4:00. Luckily, a rug dealer – one of the Helveti – showed up at breakfast. Abdullah not only knew Madame Ayasli, he also knew that the "group" she was meeting that day was the Beshara group from England. I tried calling her again to explain that I was not with the group from Beshara, but a friend of Reshad. Once again, however, she spoke rapidly into the phone, reiterating that I was to join the group at her house at 3:00 (a change) – GOODBYE! I was unable to ask her where she lived, or even make sure that she realized I was

not part of the Beshara group. I went back down to Abdullah in the dining room, map in hand, and asked him if he knew where she lived. He told me the name of the town, showed me on the map where it was on the Asian side of the Bosphorous, and suggested I take the ferry there and walk around until I found someone who could guide me to her house.

Well, I had a little more information – BUT – the idea of asking around in a city of five million people (almost none of which spoke English) for one elderly lady was a little intimidating. That morning the group was to tour the Blue Mosque, St. Sophia and other sites, including lunch at the Topkapi Museum. I decided to accompany my mother and the group until 1:30, which would give me an hour and a half to go from Europe to Asia and find a needle in a haystack. It was pouring rain.

When I walked out of the Topkapi at 1:30, there was *one* taxi out front. The driver actually spoke fair English – what were the odds? As he drove me to the ferry, he asked where I was going. I told him the name of the town/area. When we got to the ferry, it was closed down due to the weather. I asked if he could drive me over the bridge, and we agreed on the (astronomical) price. As we drove and talked, he asked me who I was going to see. When I told him, it turned that he knew her, knew her villa, in fact had business dealings with individuals who sublet from her, and entertained me with a history of her life in the Villa Bosphorous since the death of her husband. A city of five million and this is my taxi driver! We got there quite early since he drove straight there. He took me into his friends' shop and had tea brought, then drove me to a flower shop, where I purchased a bouquet of roses. At three o'clock I walked across the street to the Villa Bosphorous and rang the bell.

I was ushered upstairs and seated in the living room. It was obvious that the group from Beshara was expected, as every occasional table was set with plates, napkins and dishes of finger foods. I was served tea (of course), and the flowers I brought were placed in a vase. The TV in the room was on, with a news report being broadcast. After a time, Madame Ayasli entered the room – a tiny elderly woman, yet very direct and forceful. We exchanged courtesies, and she sat down, alternating her attention between brief comments or questions to me, and watching the TV. The living room had the look of genteel declining splendor, as the furniture was obviously antique, very expensive and beautiful, yet very worn. Floor-to-ceiling arched windows were at each end of the room, looking out over the water at the far end. Beautiful calligraphies of Arabic prayers covered the walls, along with photos and paintings. Her assistants, dressed to receive guests, hovered nearby.

After exchanging the basic news about Reshad's current activities and Bulent's recent death, the conversation ran dry. I kept expecting the group from Beshara to arrive at any moment, as did they. Finally, feeling a little uncomfortable about just sitting there, drinking tea and watching Turkish news on TV, I took my leave. She saw me out with the utmost courtesy; but as I left I felt a certain letdown. Friends had indicated that contact with her would open the other doors necessary to allow me to fulfill my agreements for the trip. But nothing had happened, other

than being courteously received. I was beginning to wonder how I would ever make contact with the Mevlevi shaykh who was to receive a letter that had been entrusted to me for delivery by Reshad and another member of Reshad's group.

My taxi driver was waiting for me outside, to drive me back to old Istanbul (for another exorbitant fee, of course). It was still raining heavily as we drove back. The driver, Elias, took the slow traffic as an opportunity to share with me his enthusiasm and his love for his city. He insisted on showing me some of his favorite places, so I agreed. First he took me to the oldest mosque in Istanbul. It was beautiful inside, with a deep carpet of green, gold and white that covered the entire floor. He explained to me all the features of the mosque and what part they played in the practice of the Moslem religious ceremonies. He described the prayer positions, and why they required the separation of men and women for praying, in order to avoid attention being distracted from God to sexual impulses.

Women did not want to bend forward in prayer with men doing the same immediately behind them. This point was driven home to me a couple of years later, when I sat up from a prostrate prayer position, and actually sat on the head of the woman in the row behind me. By placing all women at the rear, behind a screen, they were protected from sexual scrutiny, whether accidental or intentional, while praying. We then went outside and walked by the adjoining cemetery as he explained how the headstones were a visual summation of the life of the individual buried below. They were all exquisite.

Before returning to the hotel, he drove me to a small tea house high on a cliff overlooking the Golden Horn, and bought me (more) tea as we looked out on the lights below through the rain. The tea house had been the home of a famous poet, who had written his greatest works there. Elias continued to speak eloquently of his city, its history and of Islam. Some taxi driver! He educated me to the best of his ability in the short time I could give him. He was most distressed that we were leaving the next day, with so many glorious sights unseen.

Back at the hotel, I rejoined the others. Ashraf, the leader of the group, said that we had all been invited to an evening of music in a private home. On the airplane from New York, he had been seated next to a woman who apparently knew some Mevlevi musicians, and she had arranged this invitation. By this time, however, most folks were exhausted and aware that we would be waking at 5:00 a.m. for a 7:00 a.m. flight to Ankara. After long consideration, Gretchen decided to come along with me. As for me, if it had to do with the Mevlevis, I was sure I wanted to go. After all, that was what I came for – to experience the Mevlevi tradition at the source.

We went to the ferry in a taxi – Ashraf, Gretchen, me and a Canadian woman named Tamara. Five others were to meet us there, as we were to take the ferry across the Bosphorous (I had just come from there!) where we would be met by Fuzun, Ashraf's acquaintance. The second group missed the ferry – so only the four of us accompanied Fuzun to the musician's home, which turned out to be perfect for us.

The taxi dropped us off in the general neighborhood. When Fuzun asked directions of some young men in a corner store, they knew the man we were seeking and sent us straight to his door. We entered an apartment building, and climbed five stories to the top floor. The door was opened by a tall, handsome man who exuded great warmth. There was a carpet and shoe rack in the foyer, so we removed our shoes, were given slippers, then ushered into the living room. The furniture had been removed at one end, and the chairs arranged theater-style at the other end. We were seated by one of the eight or nine young men who were about the apartment. Our host, Nezih, came in to greet Fuzun, an old friend, and we were then introduced to him. He joined us in the chairs, talking and laughing with Fuzun (in Turkish) as they caught up on the news. When he left the room, Fuzun explained to us that we were about to see "turning" practice for two of his students. We had actually been invited for music after the practice; but since we were here, we had the extra gift of observing the turn in the process of being taught.

The music began, as Nezih and the other man who had greeted us seated themselves. Two young men, in turning clothes, made a formal entrance into the "semahane" while another, in street clothes, acted as dancemaster (semazenbasi). Although Nezih continued to converse with Fuzun, he watched the young men very closely, occasionally commenting, as did the other man. We were just delighted by the simple fact of being present. It was the last practice for these young men, who were leaving the next day for Konya, where they would be participating in the "Sema" Monday through Thursday in public performances at the Ataturk Sports Arena. I was amazed to find myself in the midst of musicians and dancers who would actually be participating in the celebration in Konya – and only four of us had come, including the only two Mevlevi initiates on the tour, Gretchen and me. It was becoming clear that this was not an accidental occasion.

After the practice was concluded, all the young men worked to restore the room to order, as we were served even more tea. The conversation between Nezih and Fuzun continued, as the room became quiet and the young men took their places, gathering around. Nezih picked up a kemence (Turkish fiddle) and began to play. The young men picked up drums, tanbur and neys (flutes), and joined in. The others sang along. For the next hour, they played and sang Mevlevi music – gentle, beautiful, filled with devotion. This music was different from what we had experienced at the Helveti tekke two evenings before. It was less formal, less intense, seeming to flow spontaneously from the heart in a light yet intimate way. It felt to me like friends sharing together in an activity that filled them with peace and joy – not grand or spectacular, but simple, lovely, warm with familiarity. As guests, we basked in the glow.

More tea followed the music, as the conversation expanded to include Ashraf and ourselves. Then Ashraf made the stunning announcement that Gretchen and I were Mevlevis! The sound of the shock in the room was a deafening silence.

Needless to say, Nezih was full of questions, which Fuzun translated for us. How could we be Mevlevis? Who initiated us? What was Reshad (whom he had met in 1976) doing now? What

kind of organization did we have? How many groups were there? How large was each group? Were we learning the music and the turn? If we were not, how could we be part of the Mevlevi tradition? What were our spiritual practices? Our daily prayers? How could an American ever know the essence of what it is to be a Mevlevi? Why didn't we do something American, instead of Turkish? Why didn't we follow our roots, be what we are, study American Jazz instead of Turkish music? How could an Englishman teach the Mevlevi way to a bunch of Americans?

Most of this cross-examination was directed at me. Although Nezih speaks English fluently, by speaking to me in Turkish through Fuzun, then listening to my answers (which she also translated back, with her own ideas added), he could observe my reactions and tone while I could not interpret his. It was very challenging, to say the least. I remembered the Sufi saying, "We shall try them until we know them." I tried to stay centered, to answer clearly and truthfully, with utmost respect, realizing that in this exchange was the moment of truth for me – and probably for those whom I had come to represent.

It seemed as if the very idea of such a thing as an American Mevlevi was out of the question, that the Mevlevi way is rooted in the cultural context from which it emerged. I understood his thesis very clearly, but continued to state that we followed the tradition as faithfully as we could, given the fact that we did not have that cultural support. I made it clear that we did not observe Islamic law in our daily lives. Finally we reached a point of agreement when I told Fuzun in English what Nezih had just told her in Turkish – that no matter what the cultural differences, whether or not we were "Mevlevi," we are still lovers of Mevlana, and that alone was a bond between us.

Nezih came back again to origins, however, telling Tamara that since she was part Jewish, she should follow the Jewish religion. I pointed out that in America, very few people had only one root –that most of us had a diversity of traditions in our genealogical heritage, so how were we to know which one to follow? In fact, I continued, I felt that the very positive potential of being a "mixture" was that it could lead us to a more universal understanding of God that transcended any particular religion. This idea provoked him to ask, still in Turkish: "Why do you think mixture is the same as universal?"

I quickly responded that I never meant to imply that they were the same, only that those of mixed heritage might be more open to the universal. He then asked me what I meant by "universal." Without thinking, I immediately responded, "La illaha il'llah" – there is no god but God.

"You ***are*** Mevlevi!" he exclaimed – in English. I put my hand over my heart and bowed to him in acknowledgment. He gave me a brief nod back, as if reluctant to really accept us. But from that moment forward, we were fully accepted – and welcomed, treated as if we were family members. Meanwhile, all his students, the young men, had been listening, following this exchange thanks to Fuzun's translation of my remarks into Turkish.

Because we were now 'family,' the tone of the evening changed significantly. Scrapbooks came out, including pictures of Selman Dede who – it turned out – was the shaykh at the first Sema I

attended in Houston in 1978, the one that changed my life. It seems that Nezih was at that Sema as one of the musicians, as was Fuzun and even Madam Ayasli. Kemal, the other man, the one who greeted us as we came in, turned out to be the dancemaster for Selman Dede. They shared with us all the politics within the Mevlevi Order over the previous ten years, and we realized we were with those who were the conservative Mevlevis as opposed to those who were simply considered to be performers. Nezih was to be chief musician for the upcoming series of Semas in Konya.

After the scrapbooks, Kemal showed us a coin collection which included coins more than a thousand years old. He especially wanted us to experience the coins from Mevlana's time, as they carried the vibration of that time and presence. They invited us to see them while in Konya, giving us the name of their hotel. Then they invited me and Gretchen to a special Sema that would be given at the Istanbul Galata tekke on Sunday, December 20. (It was extremely rare for the Mevlevis to be able to perform the Sema in a Mevlevi tekke or semahane). We said we would leave the tour and return to Istanbul so we could attend.

By this time, it was 3:00 in the morning. One of the young dervishes was appointed to drive us all the way back to Istanbul and our hotel, so that we could prepare to leave for Ankara. I gave the letter that had been entrusted to me to Kemal, knowing that he would place it in the right hands. I was in a state of astonishment that I had been able to fulfill this task, without ever knowing how or who or where. Divine guidance had certainly brought me to perplexity when my contact with Madam Ayasli had seemed a dead end – at which point everything then worked out better than I could have imagined.

As we stood in the foyer, preparing to leave, Kemal helped me put on my coat. I felt him bend over my shoulder, so I turned and looked at him questioningly. He stated that he had kissed my coat as he helped me into it. I was overwhelmed. This meant that now I had a dervish robe. It didn't matter a bit that it was padded with polyester instead of patched with wool.

As our dervish driver flew us back to Istanbul through flooded streets and pouring rain, kamikaze style, Fuzun told Gretchen that she was amazed by the evening. For years, she had watched many people come, be received, and depart (apparently in much the same manner as Madam Ayasli had received me). She could not recall ever having been present for an evening like this one, with the kind of exchange and inclusion that had occurred. My feeling was that the evening had been intended for us – not by any of the people present, but from another level altogether. Clearly this meeting had been orchestrated by Divine intention, and I had indeed represented all of those in America who honor Mevlana and that path or tariqa. The host and the guest, East and West, had *met*, through the grace of God. I had been able to complete my agreement to deliver the letter, without ever having had any idea how I would be able to accomplish that. I felt that all of us in America had been recognized as a branch of the family tree after all. I was humbled by the magical way the evening had unfolded, and happy that we were able to serve our friends.

We arrived back at the hotel about 4:00 a.m., too excited to sleep for an hour until the wake-up call at 5:00 – so we did our practices until it was time to go for breakfast. That morning we flew to Ankara, visited the Hittite Museum, and continued by bus to Nevshehir, in Cappadocia. Our hotel was luxurious and comfortable. The next day, Friday, most of the group went to tour the underground ancient cities of the area. Still short a night's sleep, we rested.

Saturday, we joined the group on a bus trip to Goreme, where the Byzantine Christians had carved churches and monasteries out of the soft stone of the hills. The churches were small rooms with domes carved into the ceilings, and with walls covered with frescoes. The figures depicted had all had their eyes gouged out by Moslem invaders. In the first church we entered, the "Church of the Apple," Gretchen was overcome by feelings of intense terror and quickly retreated. I had already rejoined my mother, who was unable to crawl through the carved-out tunnels into the church. While she and I roamed the area, looking at the different spaces where the early Christians had lived and worshipped, Gretchen struggled to calm herself – without much success. Finally, Gretchen and I ended up in the parking lot, with taxi drivers and bus drivers all around, some in small groups talking, others in their vehicles.

Gretchen sat on a low wall, and I sat beside her. I encouraged her to let go, to let her feelings surface. She began to sob as the terror gave way to grief, rising in waves from her heart. She had no understanding of the cause of either the terror or the grief, but simply let them be released. The men about us could not help but notice what was going on. As she gradually grew calmer, her heart began to feel light. Just then, a man rushed up to us out of nowhere, and said, "You are going to Mevlana?" We said we were. Then he thrust a newsprint magazine into Gretchen's hands and asked her to look at the picture on the cover. It was a picture of a honeycomb. The bees had filled the honeycomb in such a way that it depicted the calligraphy of *Allah* in Arabic. He asked if we knew what it was. We told him, and he insisted that this was a true miracle, that he had seen it himself. Then he opened it to the next page where there was a picture of a human heart, and pointed out to us how the veins of heart also met in such a way as to spell *Allah* in Arabic. He said to Gretchen, "now you know Allah is in *your* heart!" Then he grabbed the magazine, ran across the parking lot, and jumped into a waiting car which then flew off down the road.

At that very moment, a taxi driver in his car nearby turned up his radio to full volume. It was playing a current American pop hit, "There's No Stopping Us Now!" He laughed and nodded as we danced in the parking lot, as did the other drivers nearby. Soon after, the group returned to the bus and we departed. The group was a little confused as to why all the drivers were bowing to Gretchen, hands over hearts, as she boarded the bus and we drove away.

Later she told me that her father, a Yugoslavian native with whom she had a difficult relationship, had told her to read Maeterlinck's <u>The Life of the Bee</u> as a book of powerful spiritual and human truth. She had bought it but never read it. The honeycomb had reminded her of it. Just then, on the bus, a bee (in December!) started buzzing around her head.

When we got back to our hotel, around 1:00 that Saturday afternoon, we were starved. The group disappeared somewhere. We tried to go into the dining room, but it was occupied by about 150 well-dressed, beautifully-groomed women – a private party. They seated us at an upstairs table overlooking the main dining floor area. Most of the Turkish women we had seen in our week there had been wearing scarves, and all the peasant women wore veils. We had noticed that no women worked anywhere, nor did they dine in restaurants. We only saw them as they went about their shopping. Therefore, it was quite amazing to see so many women in one place, stylishly dressed and made-up, Western style, in a small town in rural Turkey.

As we ate our lunch, the hotel musician began to play music for the women, who were apparently having a "tea." He had a Casio keyboard setup, and later began to play belly-dance music. We were surprised when the women began going out on the dance floor, usually in pairs. Their dancing was incredible – sensuous, feminine, joyful. After so much male energy during the week, from the Helveti zikr, to men in the streets and shops, to the Mevlevis in Istanbul, suddenly here we were, awash in femininity. It was marvelous. Many women danced, while the others still seated clapped the rhythm. It was as if we had stumbled into a women's zikr, a zikr of the body in sinuous, graceful movement. It was exactly the balance we needed.

Gretchen, Mother and I sat there transfixed, watching, clapping along. There were no men present except a few waiters and the musician. At the table next to us were four young women, probably in their late teens. They came and invited me and Gretchen to dance. They wanted us to go downstairs to the dance floor, but we didn't want to intrude to that degree on a private party. So we danced upstairs, on the carpet. They showed us the movements, laughed with us at our ineptitude, applauded our efforts. We loved every minute of it.

Finally, exhausted, we felt we really should leave despite their protests. They enjoyed having American women sharing in the dance. We didn't realize at that point that all Turkish women apparently learn belly-dancing in infancy, and that it is something they enjoy mostly in the company of other women. For us, it was a healing of the split we had felt up to that day between the masculine and the feminine. Our sense of balance was restored. Clearly, masculine power expressed in the outer world, and feminine power was cherished in the protective confines of the inner, non-public world. As we left, we learned that this was the first meeting of the "Feminine Liberation Movement," and that they would be meeting like this every Saturday afternoon. They were obviously going to be a moving force!

Sunday was a retreat day. We did a little shopping, though most shops were closed (which seemed strange in a Moslem country). Mostly we rested. On Monday, the group went off to the tomb of the founder of the Bektashi order, Haji Bektash. Mother was ill, however, so we stayed behind. In the afternoon, we left Nevshehir and the waiters and staff who had become our friends. They had instructed me and Gretchen in how to greet and depart in Arabic, as they assured us that Konya was very conservative and that we needed to know the etiquette. Actually, the waiters were our friends and teachers wherever we went, throughout the trip.

After an overnight stay in a government-run motel, we drove into Konya around noon on Tuesday. By this time, our group had added about ten more people, who had arrived from earlier tours to Egypt and Israel. The group felt increasingly fractured, so we largely went our own way in Konya.

As soon as we were checked into our somewhat drab and dirty hotel in Konya, Gretchen and I took a taxi to the area of Mevlana's tomb. We had been given specific instructions of the order in which we were to visit the tombs of the saints, so our first order of business was to get help. We started walking in the direction of area shops, and asked at the first carpet shop we came to for the location of the Dervish Brothers carpet shop. A young European woman offered to take us there, but the shop owner gave us directions and we walked there on our own. It was only a half-block or so, but tucked away.

We found the carpet shop and went in. It was a large room with wooden floors, benches along the window wall facing the street and the adjacent side wall, with carpets covering the walls and stacked against the walls without benches. There was a fireplace in the corner, with an altar-type arrangement of framed calligraphy and other objects on the mantel. There were men sitting on the benches, and within a few minutes the young, blonde woman we met on the street came in and sat quietly near the door. Nejate and Ahmet, the owners, greeted us warmly, seated us on benches, and ordered tea. They pulled up stools, and we sat and talked over tea about who we were, why we had come, and the latest news of old friends from America who had preceded us there a couple of years earlier. We asked for their help in our pilgrimage to Mevlana. After a few more rounds of tea, Nejate and Ahmet agreed that Nejate would drive us, and so we climbed into his copper-colored Mercedes (a car well-known to friends and clients through many adventures).

Nejate first drove us to the tomb of Shams-i-Tabriz. It was nearly empty as we went in. The tomb was quite beautiful, filled with a presence of peace. We prayed at the railing, then Nejate stopped us near the door to drink water from a water cooler in the tomb itself. There were only three cups, which he filled with water for each of us. Thoughts about germs and cups which were obviously used by all who came to visit and pray went through my mind, but I decided to leave those worries up to God and drank the water. We backed out of the tomb and right into the arms of the group who had just arrived on the bus. With thirty of them going in at once, I was very grateful that we had been given the opportunity to be there earlier.

Next, we drove to the tomb of Konevi. The building is closed, but the grave itself is outdoors, behind an iron railing. We stood at the railing and said our prayers, again remembering all those we represented, asking that our journey be a blessing for them. Nejate told us that Konevi was Ibn Arabi's father, which was different from what I had heard of him before. As it turns out, he was his step-father and the living link between Ibn Arabi and Mevlana.

By now it was about 4:00 p.m. It would be dark within the hour, so we drove back to the carpet shop so we could visit Mevlana's tomb before closing at 5:00 p.m. Gretchen and I walked over to the tomb – which is really a mosque – from the shop. At the fountain, we did a thorough ritual washing and then, leaving our shoes outside, entered into the turbe or mausoleum. The turbe is a tekke for Mevlevis. Because it is a tekke for us, and Mevlana is the pole of love, we knew that we could not turn our backs on his sarcophagus any more than we could on the shaykh at the Helveti tekke. That meant walking backwards throughout most of the tomb. We stopped and prayed as we had been instructed to do, finally standing before the double Hu. The tomb was more than magnificent, filled with stunning tile work and intricately-crafted articles of great beauty from the sarcophagi to the illuminated copies of the Koran under glass, to the rugs on the walls, to the sound of the ney filling the space under the soaring domes.

As we made our prayers, the group again caught up with us, moving quickly to fill the area directly in front of Mevlana's sarcophagus. Hanging directly over that area is an enormous crystal chandelier ablaze with light, descending from the center dome as in all mosques. While the group stood under the chandelier, there was a small earthquake, causing the chandelier to sway and hearts to turn to ice.

Gretchen and I then returned to the carpet shop, made our thanks, and were informed that the whole group was invited for lunch the next day, Wednesday. We returned to the hotel and prepared to go to our first Sema of the trip that evening.

People poured into the Ataturk Sports Arena. Our group was seated overlooking the musicians, with an excellent view of the dance area. As the musicians, and later the dancers, came in, Gretchen and I were excited to see those whom we had met in Istanbul. We both felt a much stronger connection to the ceremony by simply knowing some of the participants. It made it less of a performance and more of a sharing of a sacred experience for us. We marveled at the ability of the dancers to find that still inner point from which the dance emerges – they were dancing in the midst of intensely bright lights, very stale air due to no ventilation (the fans were too noisy), and people who persisted in talking throughout the ceremony. We were grateful for the sacrifice that the Mevlevis have made, to keep the music and the turn alive and available, for the conditions they are now subject to are very difficult indeed and not at all conducive to an evocation of the sacred.

Wednesday, the group did indeed feast at the Dervish Brothers carpet shop for lunch. They brought in armloads of Turkish "pizza," plates of radishes, bottles of a yogurt drink, and other dishes. Turkish men drifted in and out of the shop during the day. One, who was sitting quietly behind the stove, gave me a glance of pure joy when I bowed to him on my way out of the shop, one of many times in or out. When I returned, he stood, bowed to me, took my hand, and gazed into my eyes with pure love. Not a word was said, not a word was needed. Later, I asked Nejate who the man was. He said, "You have good eyes. That is our imam." When I looked again, he

was gone. Nearly invisible to all, he came and he went. Most of the group by now was in the midst of carpet-buying fever.

During the afternoon, I located the other Ahmet, a friend of Reshad's, and asked his help in making an offering for the kezili, as Reshad had requested. On holidays, those who are able purchase a lamb which is then ritually sacrificed, roasted and offered to the poor and hungry. The kezili is the place where the lambs are prepared. Ahmet welcomed me very graciously, was happy to hear news of Reshad, and gave me several (more) glasses of tea. He said he would check on things, and asked me to come back around 5:00.

Gretchen and I then walked over to the hotel where the Istanbul Mevlevis were staying – in fact, all the musicians and dancers. Just as we arrived at the door, Ashraf, the group leader who had been with us that night in Istanbul, came up to us. We walked in together and left a note. As we were leaving, one of the young dancers we had met came in, recognized us, and said that all the others were just returning from lunch. In a moment more, Kemal walked in. We were invited to the lounge area upstairs where all the men were relaxing on couches in front of the soccer finals on TV – Turkey vs. Yugoslavia. Even the shaykh who was sitting the post at the Sema we were attending in Konya was there – a Yugoslav among Turks. We had (more!) tea and talked of our experiences since our last meeting. Nezih came in and greeted us. When Kemal's wife and family arrived, we were introduced to them and pictures were taken. Before we left, Kemal gave us tickets for VIP seating on the arena floor.

That morning, Gretchen and I spent several hours revisiting Mevlana's tomb, this time leisurely exploring and absorbing all the many wonders there. My mother had accompanied us, her only venture out of her room while in Konya (the bread and water diet was having its effect on her). During the afternoon, we returned later to the carpet shop, sharing tea and listening to the comings and goings of the interesting people who came in and out. At 5:00, I returned to the other Ahmet, who confirmed the offering for the next day – and told me that I needed to be present myself to make the offering.

That evening, we dressed up for the Sema since we were honored guests. We rode to the Arena in the bus, then went to our seats on the floor. At this close range, it was easy to see during the Sema itself how strenuous it really is for the dancers, who ranged in age from late teens to late middle age. The ceremony is physically taxing for the dancers under the best of conditions – which these most certainly were not.

When we awoke Thursday morning, the 17th, Gretchen was ill. I was to go for the offering of the lamb at 11:00. She had said she would accompany me, thinking she really wanted to be there. But her body had other ideas. I went out about 9:00 a.m., anxious because this was my last day in Konya and I still had to locate the enameled sekke medallions that Reshad had asked me to buy for him. I went into several shops near Mevlana's tomb, but they had nothing even remotely resembling what he wanted. No one spoke English. I used my dictionary. Finally, in one shop,

the owners got the idea of what I was looking for. They ordered me tea, and went in search of someone. Eventually, one came back with three sekke medallions. It was what I'd been instructed to purchase – only I needed 50 of them! This time he came back with the man who had them for sale – but he only had 48. At his price, I could only pay for 42. But I had once again almost miraculously completed one of my assignments.

With the sekkes safely in my purse, I walked back over to the Dervish Brothers before meeting Ahmet at 11:00. When I walked in, Nejate came up to me. I had asked earlier about a blacksmith named Halil, who one friend had wanted me to meet. Nejate told me he was there, and introduced me to a man sitting quietly by the stove. (I finally figured out that the *real* dervishes were usually sitting quietly behind the stove, unnoticed!) He stood to take my hand, a man with the softest of eyes, a gentle face – the very essence of simplicity, yet again with that dignity that was so profoundly affecting.

I returned to Ahmet's and we walked the block or two to the kezili. He took me upstairs and introduced me to the old man who was in charge. We could hear the lamb bleating down below us. We walked downstairs, and around the corner of the building to a side door which led into an area with a concrete floor. In the far corner was a pen with a grate in the corner. The lamb was tied up and bleating – a big yearling, as tall as my chest, maybe 70 or 80 pounds. Ahmet was very pleased with the lamb, as he was big, vigorous, lively. Then he told me that I had to hold on to the lamb while his throat was cut. I was not expecting this at all – in fact when I made the agreement with Reshad I didn't realize that I would even have to be present. But – "agreement is a stronger word than God."

The old man deftly flipped the lamb to the floor on his left side. Ahmet grabbed his right rear leg and motioned me to hold it with him. I took hold, feeling the lamb struggle to right itself, as sinew and muscle strained in his leg. Almost instantly, his throat was cut. For a brief moment, his struggle increased. Then he went slack. I was praying throughout, with my eyes closed, that his sacrifice would bring the gift of life on this most sacred of days to those who were hungry.

When I let go of his leg and stood up, blood was flowing into the drain. The old man's wife was smiling and bobbing joyfully – apparently all had gone well. She bent down and dipped her finger into the blood of the lamb, pressing it onto my forehead and crown. Ahmet assured me this was for good luck and part of the ceremony. We returned upstairs, where a receipt was made out and a record entered into the log in Reshad's name. It was done – I had fulfilled my agreement. Ahmet was *very* happy – the lamb had been wonderful and all had gone perfectly. I was grateful for that, and even more grateful that it was over. We walked back to his shop.

I took a taxi to the hotel, where Nejate had said he would pick us up for a special lunch at the home of Farishtahanum, wife of Suleyman Dede, who was now deceased. Gretchen was still too sick to go, so we arranged to meet later. When Nejate arrived, the group boarded the bus while Qahira and I were ushered into the Mercedes. Sitting next to me in the back seat was Halil, the

blacksmith. In the front was the ney-maker, another man of great dignity and a wonderful musician. The whole group was welcomed at Farishtahanum's as friends of her son Jelaluddin who lived in California, and knew several members of the group. We were joined by several men, including her other son, Abdullah; the imam I met; and others. The women served the lunch which was – Turkish pizza!

The guests sat with the hosts on the floor in two rooms, where a tablecloth was spread in the center of a circle of people. Pizza, yogurt drink, and all the rest was served to us picnic style.

After lunch, we crowded as nearly as possible into one room, where the men present began to lead prayers, and then zikr. We did one very powerful zikr, which they explained afterward. After about 45 minutes of zikr, the lunch came to an end and we all departed by bus or car for the cemetery and a visit to Suleyman Dede's tomb. It was of elegant white marble with a shaykh's sekke carved at the head, and rosebushes planted in a cavity down the center which is filled with dirt for that purpose. It was raining, as usual, as we offered our prayers in remembrance of a life of service to all.

We drove back to Mevlana's tomb, where Halil left the Mercedes, then back to the carpet shop. I don't know where the busload of folks went, although I think they went to Mevlana's tomb to arrive well ahead of the crowd for the 4:00 ceremony commemorating the time of his passing. I left briefly to meet Gretchen, and as we returned to the carpet shop we passed a street vendor in the throes of an ecstatic state. He was a purveyor of fragrances, and he had set up his wares directly across from Mevlana's tomb. As we passed by, he rushed over to us, without ever ceasing his exclamations and prayers, and pressed into my hand a small bottle of fragrant oil.

At the carpet shop, a shaykh from Istanbul – who was presented to us as the shaykh of our hosts, Nejate and Ahmet – was there along with several of the Mevlevi men from the lunch. He was engaged in a Sufi dialogue with the woman who was the leader of the group from Beshara. The wife of one of the Konya Mevlevis translated. She was a woman of four races in her parental heritage, and a radiant presence herself. We listened to the questions and Sufi-story responses for an hour, until it was time to return to the tomb. Once there, we managed to wedge our way into the crowd already assembled.

Gretchen was pushed by the crowd right up to the railing next to Mevlana's sarcophagus. I remained closer to the outside door, near Abdullah and another man who was leading prayers at lunch. The ceremony at 4:00 lasted about two minutes. There was the sound of the ney or reed flute, a prayer, and then everyone present sounded the Hu. That one moment was worth the crush. As we came out, soldiers lined the walkway, holding back crowds of people. Only then did we learn that the Turkish Prime Minister (a Mevlevi) was inside, attending the ceremony.

At last the climactic evening had arrived. This was the Sheb-i-Arus, the "Wedding Night" when, with his physical death, Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi was united with his Beloved in a union beyond time and space. That great soul afire with Divine love had slipped over the horizon

between worlds on December 17, 1273 at sunset, with the light of that love leaving a blazing afterglow in the hearts of all who had been touched by him in this life. Mevlana had been a truly universal human being, embracing people of every faith, seeing men and women as equal partners in life, loving one and all as living manifestations of his Divine Beloved. Now, 714 years later, I had traveled across the world, called to experience the traces of that eternal light. I realized that I had not found Mevlana in his tomb, but in the hearts of those who lived his legacy.

At the final Sema that evening, the crowd was quite different from preceding nights. During the week, those in attendance had been mostly common folks, devout Moslems and lovers of Mevlana. On this night, the most sacred night, the crowd was the social elite. Not only was the Prime Minister there, but many of the other ministers and their wives. Kemal had told us on Wednesday that Thursday night would be extremely difficult, and I could easily see why. The crowd had no reverence and little respect. They talked loudly throughout the musical presentation. (In earlier centuries, only initiates were allowed to listen to Mevlevi music, it was considered so sacred and filled with the Divine presence.)

Before the dancers came out, the Prime Minister, the ministers and all the news media went "backstage" to meet the dancers – so instead of time to prepare their hearts for turning, they had to meet politicians. Remember, in the government's view this was a secular performance of traditional folklore, not a spiritual ceremony. The news media were everywhere with cameras, lights, videocams. They were fascinated by the spectacle of Americans there, so we found ourselves broadcast throughout Turkey on the news and in all the papers. Gretchen covered her face with a program, saying she now understood why people didn't want to be photographed.

The dancers and musicians, however, performed impeccably in impossible conditions, and our hearts went out to them. At the very end, all the musicians joined the dancers and the shaykh in one great circle. Led by the shaykh, each walked around the circle, greeting every other brother dervish with the traditional salutation of brotherhood and gratefulness. When they finished, together they sounded the Hu. All present were encompassed.

We returned to Farishtahanum's house following the ceremony. The group from Beshara was already there, as well as some of the men and women we had met earlier in the day, plus some late arrivals. One man was playing the ney in duet with another on what looked something like a guitar. The music was exquisite. The house was very crowded. As time went on, it became obvious that the men present were giving the ney player the respect usually given to a shaykh. One man read him a poem he had written about him, causing tears to run down the shaykh's face. It was obviously a time of love, brotherhood, music remembrance – and pain, for many of these men had participated in the Sema for years as musicians and had not been invited this year in the change of management by the city of Konya. Then the man who led the zikr at lunch led us once again in zikr, followed by each of the others singing the prayers. We were swept into a unity of devotion. Refreshments followed, as we were given fresh fruit along with tea. By now it was nearly 3:00 a.m. and we had to depart at 7:00 a.m. for Pammukale.

As all of the American and English guests exited for the buses, Gretchen and I began to move toward the door. We were to be driven back to the hotel by Nejate. Just then, the shaykh/ney-player called me back. Through the interpreter, he asked me to remember that he carried all of us in America in his heart, embraced in love. I somehow responded. Then he called me back again, and told me a story of Imam Ali, when he was parting from a beloved disciple. The disciple, pained at the parting, declared his enduring love for Imam Ali during his absence. Imam Ali, however, stated that "he" would not need to think of "him" (the disciple) with love.

At this point, he paused in the story, and the men and women in the room – now all Turkish – looked at me expectantly. Here we were again: "We shall try them until we know them." I burst out laughing. So did they. After all, where *is* the separation? I turned to leave, and again he called me back. This time, with the utmost expression of tenderness, he handed me half an orange which he had peeled himself – the quintessential gift. Deeply moved, I kissed it and held it to my forehead, and then to my heart. Our eyes met, and it was time to go.

Nejate drove me and Gretchen back to the hotel. As we said good night, I was overcome with gratefulness for this delightful man who had been such a conscientious host to us. I have never in my life been treated with more respect and grace than I received from the Sufis in Turkey. He had driven me about in that copper Mercedes as if I were a visiting Queen of Sheba. When we thanked him, he joked about "24-hour service" since he was going back to drive others home – only to return and see us off in a few hours.

We departed the next morning for Pammakule. As we left, one member of our group, Huzur, told me a story from his first trip the year before. He had asked the shaykh from Istanbul (the one in the carpet shop), "Why does coming to Konya break my heart?" The shaykh responded with a story in which he related Jerusalem to the body, Istanbul to the heart, and Konya to the Spirit of God. Unlike the pilgrimage to Jerusalem or to Istanbul, the pilgrimage to Konya is for "the lovers of God, who come to Konya to be strengthened in their love." These words struck my heart, and tears flowed. And in this way, I left Konya.

Every person, every task, and much, much more had simply fallen into perfect order and completion. As one friend said, "After all, on this trip, Mevlana is the host."