

How to Use Speaking of Faith Discussion Guides

Facilitator Notes



From Krista Tippett

I'm delighted that you've purchased this Discussion Guide. I hope you find it a meaningful extension of your experience of Speaking of Faith.

These Discussion Guides were developed with a number of possible settings in mind—places of worship, schools, religious education study groups, family discussions, and informal gatherings such as book clubs. Our aim is to help you find ways to carry on the conversations you hear on Speaking of Faith—to trace the program's intersection of religious ideas and real life in your family or community. In my experience, when we do that, we also learn how to walk that line together more imaginatively and practically.

Feel free to adapt this guide to your particular needs and interests. Don't feel compelled to refer to it as a textbook, or to work through every single question. We've composed a wide range of topics and questions so you can choose the most important, most resonant and most appropriate for your group. You might focus deeply on a single question or move through many. You may work through the topic in one discussion, or extend it over two or more.

This guide is designed to be useful whether or not you have listened to the program. But it may enrich your experience to listen to all or part before you gather for conversation. Programs are available at speakingoffaith.org—you can stream the audio, or support Speaking of Faith by purchasing the program on CD or as an MP3 download.

What comes next? We'd love to hear from *you*. We're excited to learn where this guide leads you, and how we can join with our listeners and Web visitors to make each conversation smarter, wiser, and more fruitful. We will use your feedback as we explore the many ways we can keep working and talking together. Write to us at mail@speakingoffaith.org.

—Krista Tippett, host, Speaking of Faith

About Speaking of Faith

Speaking of Faith is public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. It is produced and distributed by American Public Media. Each week, Krista Tippett and her guests ask how perspectives of faith might distinctively inform and illuminate our public reflection.

Speaking of Faith learning materials are developed with major funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi

Discussion Guide



Photo courtesy of Esâm Khattak.

From Krista Tippett

The thirteenth-century Muslim mystic and poet Rumi has long shaped Muslims around the world and has now become popular in the West. Rumi created a new language of love within the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism. One of Rumi's twenty-first century interpreters and successors, Fatemeh Keshavarz, says that the poet saw human life and love as the closest we come to tasting and touching transcendence, and he approached all experience with his whole mind, heart and body.

Keshavarz describes Rumi's "whirling" around a column as he recited poetry—a habit that inspired the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Sufi Order—as a way to "stay centered while moving." He believed that, as searching and restlessness propel us to keep learning, plowing the ground beneath our feet, they are themselves a form of arrival. In Rumi's way of seeing life, perplexity is a blessed state, sometimes a necessary state. This idea has special resonance, perhaps, in the twenty-first century, when so many basic definitions and institutions of previous generations seem to be up for grabs.

But Rumi's recent "discovery" in the West also holds no little irony. "It seems almost unbelievable in the world of 9/11, Bin Laden and the Clash of Civilizations," writes British journalist William Dalrymple, "but the bestselling poet in the U.S. in the 1990s was not Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, nor Shakespeare or Dante. . . . Instead, remarkably it was a classically trained Muslim cleric who taught Sharia law in a madrasa in what is now Turkey." Yet as Rumi has been translated and popularized in the modern West, the religious sensibility behind his beautiful, bestselling words has often been lost.

Rumi champions and models a language of hope. This is not a tepid and naïve but full-blooded view of human reality—fully aware of the double-edged sword of the passions and pulls of real human experience.

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The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi

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Fatemah Keshavarz is adamant on this point: Rumi was steeped in Islam. The generous, cross-cultural appeal of his words reflects ideas at the core of Islam that are muted by the extremists and headlines of our time. But to the extent that Rumi would deny or subvert those, he does so through his grounding in Islamic tradition, and his profound love for it.

Keshavarz, who was born in Iran—the center of the vast civilization that spawned Rumi and where he remains to this day a household name—takes special solace in Rumi’s insistence that we can create worlds and possibilities by way of language itself.

Where that part of the world is now concerned, Keshavarz says, we have adopted a language of fear. Rumi champions and models a language of hope. This is not a tepid and naïve but full-blooded view of human reality—fully aware of the double-edged sword of the passions and pulls of real human experience. In this Rumi speaks to those of us on both sides of a real or imagined “clash of civilizations.”

With his vigorous and challenging language of the heart, Rumi reminds us that we need poetry as much as we need science, alongside our politics and within our diplomacy. We need passionate searching words, not just logical decisive words, to tell the whole truth about what it means to be human, and about the past, present and future of our world.

Here is one passage of many I’ve seen quoted of Rumi, which I’ll now hear with new layers of relevance:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn’t make any sense.



I invite you to join in the conversation as we explore the passionate life and work of Rumi, a perfect voice for the spiritual longing and energy of our time.

—Krista Tippett, host, *Speaking of Faith*

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For more information about Speaking of Faith and the topic of this discussion guide, or to sign up for a weekly e-mail newsletter or free weekly podcasts, visit speakingoffaith.org.

The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi

Discussion Questions



[Rumi] saw human love as a mirror of the divine, he saw perplexity as blessed and understood searching and restlessness as a form of arrival.

Krista Tippett

*Wherever you are,
Whatever you do,
Be in love.*

Rumi

*Everything in the universe
is whirling, is quickened
with love.*

Fatemeh Keshavarz



Fatemeh Keshavarz is a professor of Persian and comparative literature, and chair of Washington University's Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures. Her books include *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* and *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran*.

1. Throughout his poetry, Rumi describes love using highly sensual language. He makes no distinction between divine and human love, saying they ultimately “lead to the same king.” Rumi scholar Fatemeh Keshavarz points out that some of Rumi’s most religious ideas are expressed in erotically charged poems that seem at once addressed to both Allah and an earthly beloved. She also expands on this idea by describing human relationships as precursors to relationship with the divine—an opportunity to “test your abilities, see your problems, ask your questions, quarrel with yourself and get ready.”
 - *What do you think of the idea that all forms of love, including erotic love, relate to divine love?*
 - *Does Keshavarz’ idea of human love as a test run for divine love resonate for you? Why or why not?*

2. Keshavarz notes the playfulness in Rumi’s poetry, and likens this to the way an artist engages the creative process. “[Rumi’s] was a voice that echoed something that was on one level very familiar,” says Keshavarz, “but on another level completely new because of the way he played with it. . . the way he made it his own game. I mean ‘game’ because playing was very serious for him. Laughing and playing are the most serious things in his poetry.”
 - *What do you think Keshavarz means when she says laughing and playing are very serious for Rumi?*
 - *What role, if any, does playfulness have in the various areas of your life—in your work, your spiritual life, your relationships (colleagues, family, friends), etc.?*

3. The Whirling Dervishes, members of the Mevlevi Sufi Order inspired by Rumi’s thought and poetry, incorporated dance and music into their spiritual practice in an active form of worship called sema. Dancers spin—hands pointing toward earth and sky symbolically bringing heaven and earth together—in order, says Keshavarz, to free themselves from “obstacles to the ideal human state of loving without reserve in service to others.” She describes it as “a way of staying centered by moving.”
 - *Is there anything you do (for example, labyrinth walking, liturgical dance, walking meditation, yoga) that shares attributes with the practice of whirling?*
 - *What do you think Keshavarz means when she describes whirling as a way to stay centered?*

The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi

Discussion Questions



*Lovers do not finally
meet somewhere,
They are in one another
all along.*

Rumi

*The vision [Rumi] has for
humanity . . . It's so healing,
so needed to correct our
short sightedness.*

Fatemeh Keshavarz

*You have to love a tradition and
be completely immersed in it
before you can subvert and
transcend it. You have to love
it to want to open it up. . .
That's what I think Rumi does.*

Fatemeh Keshavarz

4. Rumi's adventurous poetry reflects his connection to Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam that emerged in the eighth century following the death of the Prophet. Keshavarz argues that the spirit of surprise and play in Rumi's work and thought, as well as Sufism's humanistic message, are a much-needed counterpoint to post-9/11 perceptions of the Muslim world.
 - *Does Rumi's approach to Islam change your perception of the scope and diversity within Islam?*
 - *Do you find this thread of mysticism embedded in Islam surprising? Why or why not?*
5. Keshavarz describes Rumi's poetry as an "encounter," and an experience that calls for active participation. She recalls one of her own encounters reading a particular *gazel*, or poem, by Rumi about beautiful birds. After describing all the attributes and abilities of various birds, Rumi abruptly turns his attention from the birds to the reader and asks, "What kind of bird are you?" Keshavarz describes her startled reaction as a personal call to action: "All of a sudden I realized I can't stay on the margins."
 - *Do you like the idea that poetry or a sacred text requires the active participation of the reader, or does it make you uncomfortable?*
 - *Have you experienced a sudden epiphany or call to action like the one Keshavarz describes? What inspired it?*
6. The themes of separation and longing recur time and again in Rumi's work. They are a powerful force that propel you forward, says Keshavarz. Incompleteness motivates you to keep looking, to keep searching. "If you ever felt that 'I've arrived . . . this is it,' then you wouldn't go any further," she says, underscoring Rumi's view that longing is redemptive, even essential, to the spiritual journey.
 - *Do you agree with the idea that longing and incompleteness are critical to spiritual growth? Why or why not?*
 - *Can you think of an instance when getting what you wanted created an obstacle to growth? Describe.*
7. Rumi's themes of separation and longing relate to the idea in Islamic theology that humans are born with knowledge of the divine but tend to forget and thus become separated from Allah or God. Islam imagines faith as remembrance of the knowledge that's always deeply embedded in human beings.
 - *Do you agree that humans possess an innate knowledge of the divine? Why or why not?*
 - *How is this view of what separates humans from God similar to or different from your own tradition?*

The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi

Discussion Questions



In our culture, we think of longing and desires as something we need to meet . . . What Rumi is saying is the longing itself is redemptive.

Krista Tippett

One of the reasons why [Rumi] addresses the issues that are of concern so much to us today is because he belongs to a tradition . . . which has always been concerned with the way human beings view themselves and each other.

Fatemeh Keshavarz

If you asked me to think of a few words that . . . describe Rumi's poetry, one of them is encounter—you come face to face with something.

Fatemeh Keshavarz

- 8.** Not knowing exactly what we're looking for is a key aspect to longing, but one of the most difficult concepts to embrace for a society oriented toward knowledge and progress on the one hand and self help on the other. "Sufism and Rumi contribute to our current culture the value of perplexity," says Keshavarz, adding "not knowing is a source of learning something that propels us forward into finding out."
- *We tend to place a premium on knowing our own mind, knowing where we're going and who we are. Why do you think Keshavarz sees perplexity as a potential benefit?*
 - *Has there ever been a time in your own life when uncertainty proved beneficial or helped you grow in some way? Describe.*
- 9.** Keshavarz describes Rumi as deeply rooted in Islam. "The way I visualize this myself is that he goes through the religion, he lives it, absorbs it, uses it in his way. In the process he subverts a lot of things, he changes and reinterprets a lot of things. But he does not step outside of it. He lives in it."
- *Do you feel it is important to immerse oneself in a tradition in order to gain spiritual depth, or is it possible to take bits and pieces from a variety of traditions and weave them into a meaningful whole?*
 - *How important is it to be familiar with the religious context of spiritual writing or sacred art in order to understand or appreciate its meaning?*
- 10.** "If we think of Iran we only have certain visions of certain moments in recent history that get repeated," says Keshavarz. She sees a special relevance for Rumi for Westerners with limited exposure to Persian culture and modern-day Iran. "Rumi says speak a new language so the world will be a new world. . . . That's what we need to do in relation to that part of the world."
- *What do you think Rumi means when he says that speaking a new language will create a new world? How do you think we can do that in regard to Iran and other countries in the Middle East?*
 - *Keshavarz points out that Rumi remains widely read in Iran to this day. What do you think Rumi's popularity reveals about Iran and Persian culture?*
- 11.** A strong current of hope runs through Rumi's poems. Hope, says Keshavarz, is what Rumi would have us nurture in ourselves. "[Hope is] the energy to go, the energy to move, to never think, 'This is not worth it, I am done, I am tired. . . .' Life kind of comes to life with his words."
- *What role, if any, does hope play in your own pursuit of the divine?*
 - *Can you think of any particular poetry or literature that brings you to life or inspires hope in you? What about a religious text?*

The Ecstatic Faith of Rumi

Notes



Resources

For additional resources about this topic, review Program Details at <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/rumi/index.shtml>