



SERMON

FREEDOM: THE PATH OF SPIRITUAL LIBERTY

Presented by Nuria Stephanie Sabato on the 12th of September 2010
Unity Temple on the Plaza, Kansas City, Missouri USA

Beloved Brothers and Sisters,

Today our subject is Freedom, The Path of Spiritual Liberty. Tomorrow, September 13th, 2010 marks 100 years since Hazrat Inayat Khan brought the Message of Universal Sufism to the West.

The Sufi Message is the Path of Spiritual Liberty. And what is liberty? According to the definition in the dictionary liberty is “freedom from control, interference, obligation, restriction, and hampering conditions. Liberty is the power or right of doing, thinking, and speaking according to choice.”

Those of us gathered here today believe and live in the spirit of liberty. Unfortunately throughout history human rights and personal liberties have been violated all in the name of religion.

We can cite the following historical examples: the Muslim Conquests, the French Wars of Religion, the Crusades, the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Counter Reformation. Unfortunately the litany of such wars is relentless. In truth, religious conflicts more often are the result of cultural and historical differences leading to the confusing impression that the conflict is primarily about religious differences.

We have an example of this in our world today where acts of political terrorism are justified as acts of the Holy War – the Jihad.

Our Murshid brilliantly try to circumvent misconceptions of the Sufi Message as having any particular narrow association with any one religion by encouraging us to learn and honor all religions.

Murshid teaches us in the Social Gathekas,

“The mystic says the explanation of the whole of religion is the investigation of the self. The more one explores oneself, the more one will understand all religions in the fullest light and all will become clear. Sufism is only a light thrown upon your own religion, like a light brought into a room containing all the things you want; the one thing needed was light.” (Social Gathekas 19, Sufi Mysticism, V: Realizing the Truth of Religion, Hazrat Inayat Khan)

A few weeks ago, a Moroccan friend and colleague of mine sent me a poem. This woman is a highly respected scholar, and the chair of her academic department at a prominent university in Morocco. As we know, in many parts of the world there are restrictions on freedom of speech and people therefore use modalities of expression, such as poetry or fictional novels, to convey social and political issues that may be viewed as subversive, too progressive, or threatening to controlling governments. My friend, in spite of all her education and the professional respect she has gained over the years, has endured great personal injustice and loss under the Family Code that was in place from 1957 – 2004 in Morocco aimed at limiting the liberties of women under the guise of religious law.

The poem my friend sent to me was written by the Syrian diplomat, poet, and publisher whose name is Nizar Qabbani. When Qabbani was 15, his sister, who was 25 at the time, committed suicide because she refused to marry a man she did

not love. During her funeral he decided to fight the social conditions he saw as causing her death. *Nizar Qabbani (21 March 1923 – 30 April 1998)*

When asked whether he was a revolutionary, Qabbani answered: *“Love in the Arab world is like a prisoner, and I want to set (it) free. I want to free the Arab soul, sense and body with my poetry. The relationships between men and women in our society are not healthy.”*

At the top of the email my friend wrote the words *“To Meditate...”*

This poem first appeared in the Pakistan newspaper, *The News International*, on the 21st of September 2008. It reads:

In a country where thinkers are assassinated, and writers are considered infidels and books are burnt, in societies that refuse the other, and force silence on mouths and thoughts forbidden, and to a question is a sin, I must beg your pardon, would you permit me?

Would you permit me to bring up my children as I want, and not to dictate on me your whims and orders?

Would you permit me to teach my children that religion is first to God, and not for religious leaders or scholars or people?

Would you permit me to teach my little one that religion is about good manners, good behavior, good conduct, honesty and truthfulness, before I teach her with which foot to enter the bathroom or with which hand she should eat?

Would you permit me to teach my daughter that God is about love, and she can dialogue with God and ask God anything she wants, far away from the teachings of anyone?

Would you permit me not to mention the torture of the grave to my children, who do not know about death yet?

Would you permit me to teach my daughter the tenets of religion and its culture and manners, before I force on her the 'Hijab' – the veil?

Would you permit me to tell my young son that hurting people and degrading them because of their nationality, colour or religion, is considered a big sin by God?

Would you permit me to tell my daughter that revising her homework and paying attention to her learning is considered by God as more useful and important than learning by heart Ayahs from the Quran without knowing their meaning?

Would you permit me to teach my son that following the footsteps of the Honourable Prophet begins with his honesty, loyalty and truthfulness, before his beard or how short robe is?

Would you permit me to tell my daughter that her Christian friend is not an infidel, and ask her not to cry fearing her friend will go to Hell?

Would you permit me to argue, that God did not authorize anyone on earth after the Prophet to speak in his name nor did he vest any powers in anyone to issue 'deeds of forgiveness' to people?

Would you permit me to say, that God has forbidden killing the human spirit, and who kills wrongly a human being is as if he killed all human kind, and no Moslem has the right to frighten another Moslem?

Would you permit me to teach my children that God is greater, more just, and more merciful than all the (religious) scholars on earth combined? And that his standards are different from the standards of those trading the religion, and that his accountability is kinder and more merciful?

Would you permit me?

Signed - Nizar Qabbani

In 1923 Murshid made this powerful claim in a New York newspaper.

"Caste is forgotten among those who are in the order. I recognize no caste, no nationality, no creed. We are all brothers [and sisters], and in every man is a spark of the divine. Perfect international unity and harmony is our aim. (Collective Work of Hazrat Inayat Khan from 1923, From a New York newspaper called The Detroit Free Press, Published 10 March, 1923)

This ideal of "*Perfect international unity and harmony is our aim.* Is highlighted in our reading today from the New Testament.

{3:18} But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, [even] as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 (Second) Corinthians, Chapter 3, Verse 18)

In 1926, within the last year of His life, Hazrat Inayat Khan gave this visionary Message over the American Radio. A portion of that message reads as follows:

Beloved Ones of God,

The “Sufi Message” is a Message today, being given to humanity. It is not a Message of the East, but it is the Message of the Soul, the Spirit.

The “Sufi Message” respects all Religions, recognizes all Scriptures, regards all the Prophets held in esteem by large sections of humanity, and is the Source and Goal of all “Wisdom in One”.

For those of us who are drawn to this Path of Spiritual Liberty, the Sufi Message which is a Universal Sufi Message, let us be contemplate this liberty, this freedom. And what is more let us contemplate our responsibility to uphold this liberty!

In the Holy Qu’ran we heard read:

If your Lord had so willed, He would have certainly made mankind one single nation but that is not what He wants, so they will continue to differ[118] except those on whom He has bestowed His mercy; and that very freedom of choice and action is the whole purpose of their creation.... [119] (*HOLY QU’RAN, Chapter 11 Hud - The Warner, Section 10, Verse 119*)

In Hazrat Inayat Khan’s biography we read:

“When our ship arrived in the harbor of New York, the first land of my destination, I saw before me the welcoming figure of the statue of Liberty,

an idol of rock, which I felt was awaiting the hour to turn into an ideal, awaiting the moment to rise from material liberty to spiritual liberty. Its wings suggested to me that it wanted to spread from national liberty to world liberty.” (Biography, Autobiography, Journal and Anecdotes, Part II – Autobiography, America, 1910 – 1912, Hazrat Inayat Khan)

Some of us may feel that no sacrifice is ever too great in the cause of liberty. Certainly our elder Sister, Noorunissa Inayat-Khan believed whole-heartedly in liberty. Let us never forget what those, who witnessed the execution of our Sufi Sister Noorunissa, have told us. On her last breath, her last word was *liberty!* How much this liberty was instilled in her heart and soul from birth.

Kabir, the great poet of India says,

‘Life is a field and you are born to cultivate it. And if you know how to cultivate this field you can produce anything you like. All the need of your life can be produced in this field. All that your soul yearns after and all you need is to be got from the field, if you know how to cultivate it and how to reap the fruit.’ Murshid elaborates this point further by teaching us, “... if this opportunity is only studied in order to make the best of life by taking all that one can take and by being more comfortable, that is not satisfying. We must enrich ourselves with thought, with that happiness which is spiritual happiness, with that peace which belongs to our soul, with that liberty, that freedom, for which our soul longs; and attain to that higher knowledge which breaks all the fetters of life and raises our consciousness to look at life from a different point of view. Once a person has realized this opportunity he has fulfilled the purpose of Life.” (Sufi Message Volume VI - The Alchemy of Happiness, Life, An Opportunity, Hazrat Inayat Khan)

Hazrat Inayat Khan has given us a vast lineage of teachings in our Sufi Movement, and Murshid years ago said,

“Our movement renders service to God and humanity, without any intention of forming an exclusive community, but of uniting in this service people of all the different religions. This movement, in its infancy, is only beginning its work, but its culmination will be a world movement. It is the world message, and the religion which will be the religion of the whole of humanity; a religion which does not distract the mind of any person from his own faith, but makes it more firm, more enlightened, more sympathetic to his own religion. It is a religion, which teaches tolerance towards the faith of another; a religion, which opens the heart to the words of wisdom, no matter what direction, they come from. This is not only a church, but a school in which to learn a lesson, the lesson of tolerance; to learn to revere all teachers and to respect all scriptures; a lesson which teaches us that we need not give up our own religion, but that we should embrace all religions in order to make the sacredness of religion perfect.” (Sufi Message Volume IX - The Unity of Religious Ideals, Part VI, THE SUFI MOVEMENT, Hazrat Inayat Khan)

In Murshid’s own words, *He asks,*

“Is Sufism Muslim?”

And Murshid’s own answer is,

If the following of Islam is understood to mean the obligatory adherence to a certain rite; if being a Mohammedan means conforming to certain restrictions, how can the Sufi be placed in that category, seeing that the Sufi is beyond all limitations of this kind? So far from not accepting the Qur'an, the Sufi recognizes scriptures which others disregard. But the Sufi does not follow any special book. The shining ones, such as Attar, Shams-e-Tabrez, Rumi, Sa'di, and Hafiz, have expressed their free thought with a

complete liberty of language. To a Sufi, revelation is the inherent property of every soul. There is an unceasing flow of the divine stream, which has neither beginning nor end.” (Sufi Message Volume 1, The Way of Illumination, The Sufi, Hazrat Inayat Khan)

And what is this unceasing flow of the divine stream – it is the stream of universal love itself!

Hazrat Inayat Khan highlights this principle of love in this teaching:

“According to the ideas of the Sufis and of all the prophets and sages who ever came to this world, the love principle is the first principle, and so it is also the last principle. There are different Yogas practiced by people of India that are the intellectual, scientific, philosophical and moral paths to God. However, the most desirable path to God that the Hindus have ever found, one which makes the whole of life beautiful, is Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion, for it is the natural path. Man's inclination is love. If he is cold, it is because he is longing for love. If he is warm, it is because love is alive. If he is suffering from depression, is yearning or sorrowing, it is because the love principle is not alive. The only life, the very source of inspiration, salvation and liberation, is love.

Murshid goes on to say, *Those great souls who have brought the message of God to humanity from time to time, like Buddha, Krishna, Jesus Christ, Moses, Abraham or Zarathushtra, were well known as most learned men. But whatever they learned, they learned from the love principle. What they knew was compassion, forgiveness, sympathy, tolerance, the attitude of appreciation, the opening of the heart to humanity. What they taught was love, a simple truth. If religions seem complex, they have been added to. In every case, what the [various] prophet[s] brought was simple, and it was*

expressed in their personality and their life. It is that influence which has remained for centuries after they have passed away. It is not the literature they have left; most of the literature is from their pupils. It is the simple truth shown in their personalities, in their lives. The error of this day and age is that we cannot understand the simple truth, the truth as it is manifested everywhere. Instead, we are trying to find truth covered by a shell.” (Sufi Message Volume X - Sufi Mysticism, Sufi Poetry, Shamsuddin Muhammad Hafiz, Hazrat Inayat Khan)

“Now I wish to explain to you our Movement. Our Movement is a movement of the members of different nations and different races, united together in the ideal of wisdom.”

“That wisdom does not belong to any particular religion or any particular race. Wisdom belongs to the human race. It is a divine property which mankind has inherited; and it is in this realization that we, in spite of different nationalities and races and different beliefs and faiths, still unite and work for humanity in the ideal of wisdom.”

“Our school today, having a wider field of work, we are presenting to the followers of all religions, besides to those who have perhaps no religion: to a spiritual person, to a material person, both.”

“Therefore the realm in which the esoteric school of the Sufi Movement presents its method is necessarily different and distinct in itself.”

“The representatives of our inner school, therefore, and those who are initiated, have a more general idea of Sufism than those belonging to other schools, who only have an idea of their particular section.”

“Therefore, you should not be surprised if one of our initiated members of the Sufi Movement proved his outlook a wider outlook compared with a member of other sectional schools of Sufis.”

“However, you will find the central theme the same. This I have not said in order for us to be proud of our broadness; it is only said in order that we may try in our life that we may keep up to that ideal, and not fall short of that broader outlook and that broader ideal.”

“For the life on the earth has a tendency to drag us to narrowness, and therefore we must know that we have continually that fight all along in our progress on the spiritual path.”

“Remember that unity is strength and working for the unity of the world is greater strength still.” (Collected Works of Hazrat Inayat Khan, 1923-II, page 869)

In closing let each of us search within our own heart and ask what is this Spiritual Liberty which is emphasized again and again by Hazrat Inayat Khan. Contemplate the world and culture into which Murshid was born, and ask “Why did Murshid leave His native land of India, which is known for its varied religious influences, creeds, and castes systems, in the pursuit of the spreading of the Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty? If we can come to truly and deeply understand this we would not dare draw undue parallels which restrict the Message, but each of us would, like Noorunissa, on our dying breath shout – *Liberty!*

As we heard read here today in the Gayan, No sacrifice is ever too great to be offered in the cause of liberty. (*Gayan, Vadan, Nirtan, Hazrat Inayat Khan*)

I offer this wish and prayer:

May the authentic vibration of the Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan inspire us constantly in the pursuit of the truth of Spiritual Liberty and worldwide liberty.

May the might of our Unity in this pursuit be ever and renewably strengthened.

May we forever strive to tear down the scaffolding of constricted beliefs in the pursuit of true Spiritual Liberty.

May we continually be reborn into the aliveness, freshness, and openness of Spiritual Liberty that can only be likened to standing on the top of a mountain where one has a very broad view beyond all blinding constrictive limitations.

May each one of you be blessed in your loving service towards this great Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty expressed through Love, Harmony, and Beauty.