



Egyptians dance in traditional costumes as they perform Sufi dance known as "whirling dervish" in Cairo, Egypt. AMR NABIL/AP

Sufi fables that make us laugh



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The leader of the "house church" I attended during the first few years of college liked to tell stories from the Sufi mystics. We would frequently laugh at the "crazy wisdom" of these nutty storytellers, but the smiles were often followed by a deeper lesson hidden in the nutshell.

One story I remember was about a Middle Eastern merchant with a donkey who went back and forth across a border. The guards knew the man must be smuggling something, but each time they inspected the load on the back of the donkey they found nothing and let him cross.

Years later a border guard saw the old man and asked him, "We know you were smuggling something. Be honest!" You can probably guess the answer: "Donkeys."

Sufi stories, similar to many tales from Buddhist, Jewish and Christian history, are a dervish dance between a serious spiritual lesson and a playful joke. Like a good parable, these often nonsensical stories are meant to tease and tickle into more sapient and sensible thinking.

Utilizing paradox and non sequitur, teachers might cause listeners to wonder who the real instructor was.

The word "sufi" is from Arabic terms for mystic and wool (early Sufis were poor and often wore wool clothing). The tradition touches the heart of Islam. As Encyclopedia Britannica explains: "By educating the masses and deepening the spiritual concerns of Muslims, Sufism has played an important role in the formation of Muslim society."

Probably the most famous Sufi poet, Rumi was born in Afghanistan (then part of the Persian empire) in 1207. His wisdom was heretically inclusive: "Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen. Not any religion ... I belong to the beloved ... breath breathing human being" ("Only Breath").

Also: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival ... Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond" ("The Guest House").

Another tale from Sufi tradition: Mula came upon a frowning man walking along the road to town. "What's wrong?" he asked. The man held up a tattered bag and moaned, "All that I own in this wide world barely fills this miserable, wretched sack."

"Too bad," said Mula, and with that, he snatched the bag and ran down the road. Having lost everything, the man burst into tears. Meanwhile, Mula quickly ran around the bend and placed the man's sack in the middle of the road where he would have to

come upon it.

When the man saw his bag sitting in the road before him, he laughed with joy and shouted, "My sack! I thought I'd lost you!" Watching through the bushes, Mula smiled. "Well, that's one way to make someone happy!"

Brain-twisters

The Sufi scholar Idries Shah related this humorous story about two fishermen in a boat:

The men caught some fine fish. When they were going home, one said to the other, "How are we going to make our way back to that wonderful fishing place again?" The second said, "I thought of that — I marked the boat with chalk!"

"You fool!" said the first. "That's no good. Supposing next time they give us a different boat?"

These marvelous brain-twisters are endless.

There was once a small boy who banged a drum all day. No matter what anyone else said, he wouldn't stop. Various people were called in by neighbors and asked to do something about the child.

One by one, townsfolk came to warn the boy about his eardrums or that drums were only for sacred ceremonies. They gave him a book and meditation lessons. They even gave neighbors earplugs. Nothing worked.

Eventually, a Sufi came along. Handing the boy a hammer, he said, "I wonder what's *inside* the drum?"

It seems those who are truly wise aren't afraid to ask either silly, surprising or serious questions that get right to the heart of the issue.

Finally, here's a delightful story I used in a class:

Four travelers were given a piece of money to share.

The first was a Persian. He said: 'I will buy some *angur*.'

The second was an Arab. He said: 'No, I want *inab*.'

The third was Turk. He said: 'I want *uzum*.'

The fourth was a Greek. He said: 'I want *stafil*.'

Hearing this argument, a man of wisdom spoke up: "Give me the money and I'll go buy something to please all of you."

Taking the coin, he went to the market and returned with a sack.

"You all were asking for the same thing in your own language. Here are the grapes."

Sufi stories are like smuggling the truth across the boundaries in our heads — sometimes the best lesson is right in front of us, silent or braying.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press. Chris will be teaching a course through the Great Smokies Writing Program this spring.