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"Caring for the Ill"

Kristin Zahra Sands

> God will say on the Day of Resurrection, "O child of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit me." [The child of Adam] says, "My Lord, how could I visit you when you are the Lord of all beings?" God says, "But didn't you know that my servant so-and-so was sick and yet you did not visit him? Did you not know that if you had visited him, you would have found me present with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food but you did not feed me." [The child of Adam] says, "My Lord, how could I feed you when you are the Lord of all beings?" God says, "Didn't you know that my servant so-and-so asked you for food and you did not feed him? If you had given him food, you would have found that in my presence. O son of Adam, I was thirsty but you did not give me water." [The child of Adam] says, "My Lord, how could I give you water when you are the Lord of all beings?" He says, "My servant so-and-so asked you for water but you did not give it to him. If you had given him water, you would have found that in my presence."[1]

This dialogue between God and the human race, recorded in a divine saying or *ḥadīth qudsī*,[2] can be read—and should be read—as an urgent reminder of our obligation to respond to the needs of others. But the wording of the *ḥadīth* hints at deeper issues and broader possibilities than conventional notions of duty. What happens in the moments in which we are called upon by others? Why do we often turn away from those in need of us? Sometimes, there is irritation at the interruption or fear of one's own dependencies. There is the fatigue that sets in when one is asked to give again and again. Alternatively, there is the self-satisfied pride that follows some small sacrifice, the patting of oneself on the back for what was not at all difficult to give. But what does it mean to say that God is present with the ill, the hungry and the thirsty, and that one could find that presence in responding to those in need?

My approach to this question draws upon two sources: the textual sources of Islam and personal experience. The primary textual sources I am relying on are the Qurʾān and selections from the literature of Sufism, also referred to as mystical Islam.[3] The literature of classical Sufism is characterized not only by its references to contemporaneous exegetical, theological and legal discussions but also by its use of anecdotes and poems that express an ethical and emotional sensibility that is particularly suited to the topic at hand. This article is *not* an article surveying practices of caring for the ill in Muslim societies. Instead, it is very much situated in my particular experience within a privileged middle-class and secular environment in North America. I care, along with my husband, for a daughter with spina bifida, hydrocephalus and epilepsy, conditions which have led to a broad range of chronic, pervasive and difficult challenges as well as acute emergencies. Our experiences, although profoundly personal, have also necessarily involved repeated in-depth encounters with the services of outside professionals and private and public institutions. These encounters have led me to question the relationship between private beliefs and the organizational structures of a community, particularly the secular assumption that these *can* be separated. The issues addressed here, then, are as much about private faith as they are about the relationship between that faith and action in the world.[4]

The Shock

> *No, We hurl truth against falsehood and it smashes out its brain and the falsehood is suddenly nothing*. (Qurʾān 21:18)[5]

The usual resting state of my consciousness consists of a carefully maintained bubble, within which a sense of entitlement to comfort and ease exists in tension with a gnawing fear of loss. One of these imagined "losses" materialized six months into my second pregnancy, when a sonogram uncovered the fact that the child I was carrying had a significant disability. The first idol to shatter and hit the dust was the one that had assured me that I could predict and control events, if only I was willing to follow the rules—in this case those of the healthy living required for a healthy pregnancy. Finding myself in the uncomfortable situation of needing help from strangers, I entered the utterly foreign and complicated world of specialists in the medical profession, starting with a superior physician in a prestigious medical center. As I lay in his examining room experiencing my first internal sonogram, he stared at the image of my daughter's spine on the screen and exclaimed with excitement, "It's a very large defect!" and called in what seemed to be an entire class of medical students from the university to check it out. No matter the indignities, I reassured myself—we were fortunate to be receiving the best medical care in the world. Sitting afterwards in his office, the physician gave us a well-written, thorough report on his findings, and then abruptly mentioned the stress that children with disabilities have on families and handed us a small piece of paper with the name of someone who would perform what would have been an illegal abortion at that late date in the pregnancy. This was the first lesson of many for me that the same qualities that support the long and arduous development of excellent physicians are not necessarily the same qualities one longs for in a highly fragile state. This is not to say that there are not many doctors out there, many of whom I work with, who are extraordinary human beings who combine rigorously practiced medicine with heart touching sensitivity. But there are also many who do not combine these qualities.

The second idol, then, to fall was my sense of entitlement to be treated in a certain way. Whatever slights I had suffered up to this point paled in comparison to this new kind of vulnerability. Having been raised to be as independent as possible, I found the task of petitioning others acutely painful to me. I had very few tools at my disposal for coping with the indignities of asking others for help, a situation many face far more frequently than I do, with far fewer resources. Visible to me now in the waiting rooms of medical offices and in hospital wards, these are the (mostly) women who fight on a daily basis on behalf of their children and other family members, demonstrating extraordinary levels of courage, intelligence, patience and persistence, all of which frequently goes unrecognized. But from my position of privilege, the events of my daughter's birth were shattering.

> A madman in Baghdad throws a stone into a shop selling glasses and all the glasses shatter with a great crash. When they ask him why he's caused such damage, he answers: "I so enjoyed the crash and tinkling sound. Whether it causes damage or is of any use, that has nothing to do with me as a madman." (Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār d.1220)[6]

Calling for help

> *Mankind! An example has been made, so listen to it carefully. Those whom you call upon besides God are not even able to create a single fly, even if they were to join together to do it. And if a fly steals something from them, they cannot get it back. How feeble are both the seeker and the sought!* (Qurʾān 22:73)

There are many false gods to call upon, some more obviously fake than others and more easily exposed. Belief in the omniscience and omnipotence of modern medicine is a belief sustainable only by very limited interactions with the profession and its institutions. Many of the doctors I have worked with have expressed their awareness of the limits of their prescriptions, tests and interventions, and my confidence in them is in direct proportion to their humility. However, what has been harder to bear than the limits of knowledge in the medical profession and its institutions are the limits in its ability to provide comfort; one could say I have searched for a personal and caring god here without success. One arrives in an emergency room with the expectation that all will be taken care of. Instead, obtaining necessary care in today's medical system is more often than not a sustained struggle that requires tactical skills. A bewildering array of people provide services in emergency rooms and hospitals and they are empowered to act only in carefully delineated areas. In New York State, hospitals are required to post and give you a copy of the "Patients' Bill of Rights." Among the rights given to patients is the right to "know the names, positions, and functions of any hospital staff involved in your care and refuse their treatment, examination or observation."[7] Anyone who cares for patients in hospitals needs to understand this right along with the other rights of patients—I have sat in an emergency room perched on the edge of a gurney for three hours before finally receiving the hasty confidence of a kind worker that there was no one available that evening who had the authority to examine a child beyond the initial triage. But to return to the "Patients' Bill of Rights," the language used here is significant: it is the language of the ethics of justice, not the ethics of care. What is odd about this is that one is certainly not looking for a fight in a hospital or emergency room admission, and yet a strategic, rational analysis of the system followed by assertive—and sometimes aggressive—action is frequently necessary to get necessary care. It is extremely important as the caregiver for a patient to understand who has the power to do what in the hierarchical structure of hospitals. It is also important to understand that the primary task of the hospital is to care for the body. The task of attempting to relieve the fear, grief, boredom, and exhaustion that patients and caretakers experience comes under the rubric of auxiliary services, the social workers, chaplains, and recreational therapists who are entrusted with the power to soothe and help within limited financial parameters. So, although the hospital is invaluable in its rationing out of resources for keeping the body functioning as best it can, it makes for a very poor personal god.

Right behind the fear for the well-being of one's child is the fear of how one will be able to pay for extraordinary medical costs. It has been suggested by some scholars that the concept of God's providence has been replaced in modern societies by a belief in the providence of the state and the economic structures closely tied to it.[8] The safety net for expensive medical costs in the United States is insurance, provided by and partially paid for by employers, privately purchased, or, as a last resort, provided by the state. Although the reimbursement guidelines for these organizations are relatively clear, anyone with extensive medical bills knows that getting all the bills paid appropriately requires an endurance marathon of phone calls and emails if one does not want to end up with thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars in bills. If the primary organizing principle of hospitals is hierarchical, the organizing principle of health maintenance and other kinds of insurance organizations is bureaucratic, a structure that seems to lend itself to labyrinths of inflexible, complex and sometimes absurd procedures for obtaining the resources which are the right of the members.

A key characteristic of these organizations is that there is no way to develop a personal relationship with any one individual. In hierarchical organizations like hospitals, it is relatively easy, once one understands and respects what each person can and cannot do, to make personal connections. But in most health maintenance organizations and insurance companies, there are a series of barriers separating the member and those who have the power to reimburse claims. Most use automatic phone systems that are presumably designed to increase efficiency but which unnecessarily delay members whose problems can only be addressed by speaking with a live customer service representative. When a live representative is finally reached, they are instructed to identity themselves by their first names only and it is more than likely that you will never speak to the same representative twice. When an initial, single error compounds into a series of errors that require multiple phone calls, each phone call will be answered by a new representative who will piece together the evidence of what happened by their computer records, feeling no personal responsibility for the preceding errors and therefore no corresponding sense of urgency concerning the problem. While the system perhaps succeeds in its function of equitably distributing limited resources to members with the requisite stamina, the outcome comes at the cost of an outrage: the more you and your dependents have suffered through medical procedures, hospital stays, doctors' visits, and the more your time and resources have been stretched, the more you will be subjected to frustrating struggles with anonymous company representatives and systems. The point here is not to complain, as I am acutely aware of how fortunate I am to have good insurance and access to good medical care, but to point out the deficiencies of the providential god of the insurance society.

Bargaining with God

Call upon Him in fear and longing. (Qurʾān 7:56)

Of course, in retrospect, hospitals and insurance companies make for rather silly idols. Another trick of the religious imagination is more personal: the attempt to bargain with God. Uncharacteristically for me, I adopted this approach wholeheartedly in the time period in which my daughter was having repeated grand mal seizures. No medicine seemed to work and the violent seizures increased, making it difficult to leave her alone for even a moment, and making it difficult to do anything but sit and wait for the next one, whether that would be in a few minutes or a few weeks. Little by little I found myself unraveling. God did not appear to help me like the Superman I watched on TV and in movies as a kid or in the news coverage of real life Superman stories. When a child who has fallen down a well is saved, I am the first to start weeping. But I am also the first to raise the question of the other children who are not saved and instead die horribly. Are there not enough Supermen to go around? But, regardless of my misgivings as to the integrity of the process, I began, in my distress, to do what I had always assiduously avoided up to this point in my life: I began to pray to god, the merchant. What would it take to buy the end of my daughter's seizures? I was willing to put everything I had on the table.

There is a degree of legitimacy to this approach; sometimes God sounds like a merchant in the Qurʾān. The ultimate bargain, after all, is the afterlife. You work hard and try to behave yourself for a few decades and obtain happiness for eternity, which is a pretty good deal. But there is a problem here. Justice of this sort, and the arguments of theodicy[9] that assure you that everything will be fine in the end, work best when you are sitting on the fence at a distance, not sitting waiting for the next seizure. The problem is in the moment, not later. Within the moment there is no good reason for suffering, especially the suffering of those without blame. A

passage from Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamozov* is often quoted in discussions of theodicy.[10] It is a passage that questions the notion that future harmony in the afterlife can ever justify particularly horrific instances of suffering, especially those inflicted on others by man himself. When the character Ivan Karamozov visits his brother Alyosha, who is training to be a priest in a monastery, he uses a number of horrible examples of tortured children and animals to argue that innocent suffering could never be part of a larger scheme of justice, or at least not one that he would want to be a part of.

> "I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket. And it is my duty, if only as an honest man, to return it as far ahead of time as possible. Which is what I'm doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha. I just most respectfully return him the ticket."[11]

I have always sided with Ivan. In the moment or string of moments of horror and terror, do we have to tolerate the intolerable? Is *this* what has to be put on the bargaining table? A point comes where the language of prayer moves from the mercantile to the *crie de coeur*, from the rational bargaining of resources, goods, rights, and entitlements, to cries into the unseen. What kind of prayer is the appropriate kind when you are alone with your child in a hospital room in the middle of the night and an excruciatingly painful, invasive medical procedure must be done? And you are not totally convinced that it is necessary? I don't have an answer to this other than to relate something I heard from a thirteen-year old girl. Some years ago, I was with a group of young Muslim girls who were talking about whether or not it is acceptable to pray to get good grades at school. Several of them were shocked at the very idea of asking God for something so petty, thinking prayer should be saved for more serious matters and for the benefit of others. This girl, however, vehemently denied this line of thinking; she kept repeating, "There are no boundaries! There are no boundaries!" The desire to obtain good grades or a soul-mate, the pleading to stop the suffering of oneself or another is, in the end, all the same. Prayer, at the point where the bargaining stops and honesty begins, is a spectacular dive off a cliff into the unknown.

> In the beginning, when I was a novice in love,
> My neighbor could not sleep at night from my whimpers.
> But now that my pain has increased, my whimpering has decreased.
> When fire takes over something completely, smoke dwindles.
> (Aḥmad Ghazzālī d.1126)[12]

The Trial

> *Mankind was created weak*. (Qurʾān 4:28)
> *Mankind was created of haste*. (21:37)
> *Mankind was created fretful*. (70:19)
> *Say: Even if you were to possess the hidden treasures of the mercy of my Lord, you would cling to them, afraid of spending." Mankind is ever niggardly.* (17:100)

The love of worldly desires has been made attractive to men, desires for women, sons, piles of gold and silver, fine horses, livestock and fertile land. (3:14)
Souls are prone to selfish greed. (4:128)
And you love possessions with an ardent love. (89:20)
Mankind wearies not of praying for the good but if something bad touches him, he is despairing and hopeless. (41:49)

Alongside of the terrifying moments of acute medical crises, there is the grind of chronic conditions, and it is in this daily grind that one has the time to experience the breadth and depth of one's faults and weaknesses. The quotes from the Qurʾān above suggest that the very substance of human beings is comprised of weakness, impatience, agitation, selfishness, self-pity, greed and the narcissistic need for material things and other people. The angels themselves were aghast when power was entrusted to this strange and frightening creature with its consuming desires and lack of self-control:

When your Lord said to the angels, "I am putting a deputy on the earth." They said, "Why put on it one who will cause corruption on it and shed blood when we glorify You with praise and proclaim your holiness?"
He said, "I know what you do not know." (Qurʾān 2:30)

Although the angels could not understand what God understood, they were prescient in their assessment that the weaknesses with which Adam and Eve were created would lead to the actions that caused their fall from the Garden and their subsequent actions on earth. The seal on the fate of human beings was *"Go down, each of you an enemy of each other"* (Qurʾān 2:36, 7:24), a curse that suggests that, down here on earth, enmity flows quite a bit more naturally between human beings than altruism, mutual aid or care for one another. The ferocity with which humans deal with one another is met in equal part with the burdens experienced by the vulnerability of the body on earth, with its burdens of illness, hunger, thirst, and need for shelter. To be human is to experience corporeal and emotional vulnerabilities: bodily pain and discomfort, fatigue, anguish, grief, and fear. As the Qurʾān says, *We created mankind in trouble* (90:4)[13]

Among those who do not consider themselves practitioners of a "religion", there is a common perception of religion as a kind of comfort blanket for believers, offering some degree of defense for its holder against fear and despair. Although this may be true for some believers, there are also many examples of religious figures who express the pain of life without trying to minimize it, even as they turn towards God. The classic expression for this is the lament or complaint. In the Qurʾān Mary is described as having to face the pain of giving birth to Jesus alone, her sense of isolation intensified by a community that is quick to condemn her. As she is overwhelmed by the agonies of childbirth, she cries out, *"Would that I had died before this and been a thing forgotten!"* (19:23). The prophet Jacob has to bear not only the lies and deception of his sons but his grief for the son that has been taken away from him:

And he turned away from them, saying "O my sorrow for Joseph!" His eyes were filled on account of grief but he suppressed his anger. They said, "By God, will you never stop remembering Joseph until you are overcome by disease and then death?" He said, "I complain of my sorrow and grief to God alone, and I know from God what you do not know." (Qurʾān 12:84-86)

ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d.1039) cries out in his rhymed *Munājāt* (whispered conversations with God):

> O God, this is not living but torture
> And this is not life, but a structure reared on water;
> Without Your grace we are undone.[14]

Another Sufi, Abū'l Qāsim Muḥammad al-Junayd (d.910) has a much dryer style, especially useful for dispelling the mental trick that seeks escape from the reality of pain and suffering by imagining that the particular events of one's own life are unusual, thereby granting oneself the illusion that one is somehow special in one's pain. Instead, life's indignities and cruelties are only too ordinary for countless numbers of people. Al-Junayd says,

> "I don't perceive what I endure from the world as something loathsome. For I accept it as a basic fact that the here and now is a house of grief and sorrow, of torment and affliction, and that the world is utterly bad. Thus it's normal if it confronts me with everything I find repulsive. If it confronts me with what I like, that's something above the normal. But the original, normal situation is the first case."[15]

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 1273) is amazed that we remain attached to a world that causes so much pain:

> Look not at time's events, which come from the spheres and make life so disagreeable!
> Look not at this dearth of daily bread and means of livelihood! Look not at this fear and trembling!
> Look at this: In spite of all the world's bitterness, you are passionately and shamelessly attached to it.[16]

The trial or affliction of being human, then, is the experiencing of our vulnerability both from without and from within, from those who would hurt us, from the afflictions of the body and poverty, and from the endless refilling of our desires and fears.

According to the Qurʾān, mankind brings additional pain and suffering upon himself in three primary ways.[17] I have already mentioned the absurd intensity and diligence with which one can look for help in all the wrong places. This is the cognitive error that the Qurʾān refers to as idolatry *(shirk)*.[18] Another cause of pain for human beings is the disconnection between stated belief and actions, a phenomenon that the Qurʾān refers to as hypocrisy *(nifāq)*. The problem most often referred to, however, is called *kufr* or *kufūr*, words that are usually translated as "unbelief" or "infidelity." "Unbelief" is a problematic translation because the English word "belief" suggests a cognitive function that is implied only secondarily in the Arabic. "Infidelity" is better but still fails to capture the full sense of the Arabic, which refers to the refusal to acknowledge the favor or benefit that has been conferred upon one; its antonym is thankfulness (*shukr*).[19] The Qurʾān says, *most men refuse everything but kufūr* (17:89, 25:50). The primary meaning of *kufr* and *kafūr*, then, is relational. In English one can say, "I believe in you," which implies wholehearted support for another person. The words *kufr* and *kufūr* refer to the rejection of this kind of belief; to be an "unbeliever" *(kāfir)* is to think badly of God.

The Qurʾān uses two words to describe alternative attitudes that will ultimately lessen the pain and lead to happiness. The first of these is "submission" (*islām*), which strikes at the very heart of human restlessness and agitation. The Persian poetess Rābiʿa bint Kaʾb (fl. 10th century) writes, "I acted like a wild horse not knowing: to struggle draws the noose tighter.[20] To be "one who submits" *(muslim)* is to stop running and hand oneself in. To struggle in the midst of physical pain or emotional suffering increases the pain and the only way out is to do what is counterintuitive: to relax into the pain. To be "one who submits" is to recognize one's "smallness" and the fact that self aggrandizement adds to the pain. According to Ḥakīm Abū'l Majd Majdūd Sanāʾī (d.1131),

> Humility[21] suits you, violence doesn't:
> a naked man frantic in a beehive
> is out of place.[22]

The other attitude is that of faith (*īmān*), which entails thinking well of God (*ḥusn al-ẓann*).[23] As with the term "infidelity" (*kufr*), the meaning is less cognitive than it is relational. In these verses, Sanāʾī compares our careless cruelty (*jafāʾ*) to God's loyalty and fidelity (*wafāʾ*):

> You have been unkind.
> He keeps his faith in you.
> He is more loyal to you
> than you are to yourself.[24]

To think badly of God is to lose faith in one's potential as a human being, to lose faith in discovering what was meant when God said to the angels, *"I know what you do not know"* (2:30). Human beings are a mysterious mixture of the high and the low:

> *We created mankind in the best kind of symmetry*
> *Then We returned him to the lowest of the low.* (95:4-5)
> *By the soul and that which shaped it*
> *And inspired it in its shamelessness and its consciousness of God (taqwa)* (91:7-8)

Sufis have not been above pointing out the contradictions of God's plan, even as they admit that it is impolite to do so. In another one of his *Munājāt*, Anṣarī writes:

> O God, You poured the jewels of purity into Adam's lap,
> And sifted the powder of rebellion upon Satan's head.
> You mingled these two opposites.
> In courtesy to You I should say that we did wrong,
> But in reality You provoked the mischief.[25]

To return to the matter of justice, the problem is clear. The deck is stacked against human beings in a grand way, and yet the beauty of being human lies precisely in the tension between man's extraordinary capacity to behave badly and the equally extraordinary possibility of acting well. To accept this situation wholeheartedly requires giving up the logic of justice and embracing the illogic of pure giving.

Choosing a new economy

> Be contented with your lot;

but if you have any complaints,
go and take them to the judge,
and obtain satisfaction from him.
—That's how the fool's mind works![26]
(Sanāʾī)

I have mentioned how hospital and insurance systems run on the principle, realistic enough, that there are a set amount of resources; their job is to distribute these resources as equitably as possible to patients and members. However, given the fact that the resources are limited and organizations are not always efficient in what they do, the smart caregiver quickly realizes that one of their many jobs is to fight with persistence and resolve to make sure the patient and the patients' family get they help they need. The principle of equitable distribution and the fight for justice is similar to the mercantile bargain with one's soul, albeit with the addition of a stronger guarantee of justice: if you are good and do what you should, you will be rewarded, if not here then in the afterlife. The Qurʾān states repeatedly that there will be no injustice in the end: *You will not be treated injustly by even so much as the thin membrane in the groove of a date-stone* (4:77; see also 4:49 and 17:71). Although seeking and attaining justice is a praiseworthy goal that is both necessary and liberating, it is ultimately unsatisfying if it is not itself freed in turn by the qualities of forgiveness and generosity. Likewise, the pragmatic goal of securing the essential needs of oneself and one's family becomes oppressive if not balanced with the acceptance of uncertainty. Otherwise, that fear may manifest itself as another form of niggardliness:

The mean live in fear
for their daily bread:
the generous never eat
yesterday's reheated leftovers.[27]

Sanāʾī's playful metaphor here unexpectedly locates pleasure in giving without fear, in a voluntary embracing of insecurity. The word "generosity" refers to something beyond responding to the needs of others; it refers not only to the act of giving but also to an attitude behind that act that renounces any claims to justice or demands for guarantees that one's own needs will be met equally in the future.

The act of giving to another may start from a principle of equity—if one has more than someone else, it is only right to give up some of what you have—but giving past the boundaries of this logic is something else altogether. Abūʾl Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d.1074) describes three different degrees of generosity, using a different word in Arabic for each:

According to the Sufis, *sakhā'* is the first degree. *Jūd* comes after it, and then *īthār*, preferring others to oneself. Whoever gives a part and keeps a part [of his wealth] possesses *sakhāʾ*. Whoever freely distributes most of it, but keeps something for himself possesses *jūd*. The man who suffers need but prefers that someone else have enough possesses *īthār*.[28]

The first degree of generosity described here is necessary for social cohesion; it is hard to imagine a society that could exist without some degree of redistribution of wealth and resources from those who have a great deal to those who have very little. It is also hard to see this as much more than enlightened self-interest; societies with gross inequalities are not secure societies. Individuals who are not at least reasonably giving in their relationships tend to have

unstable relationships. To not respond at this level is to demonstrate ignorance of this fact, as well as a complete contempt for others, whether crudely justified or not:

> *And when it is said to them, "Spend out of that which God has given you," those who are ungrateful say to those who have faith, "Should we feed someone who, if God willed, He could have fed?"* (Qurʾān 36:47)

But giving out of enlightened self-interest is still basically the same as bartering; the Qurʾān accepts it as such and offers reassurance:

> *Whatever you spend in the way of God will be paid back to you in full and you will not be wronged.* (8:60)

Although the Qurʾān accepts the concept of bartering, the phrase *"Spend out of what God has given you,"* suggests that the premise that what one possesses, whether that means resources, honor or personal security, can be attributed entirely to one's hard efforts, is a faulty one. It is very easy to take health and privileged social and economic circumstances for granted. But if what you have is as much the result of good fortune as it is individual exertion, then the concepts of personal property and innate rights have to be understood in a larger context. Enlightened self-interest would recognize that self-sufficiency is not permanent; familial or communal aid is needed by everyone at least at some points in their lives. The logic is still essentially one of bartering but with a longer time frame that has faith in the idea that "what goes round comes round."

Beyond the level of generosity understood as enlightened self-interest, there is a kind of generosity beyond the principle of the "fair deal" and the basic logic of functional families and societies. Rather than a one-to-one exchange, the premise here is that there is more than enough to go around, and that the very act of giving leads to the multiplication of resources and energy. Al-Qushayrī uses the word *jūd* to describe someone who keeps a little for himself but gives away most of what he has; it is a word that comes from the same Arabic root as the word *jawd*, used to describe a plentiful rain. The Qurʾān uses an agricultural metaphor to describe this kind of generosity that moves beyond the level of bartering.

> *The likeness of those who spend their wealth in the way of God is like a grain out of which grows seven ears and in every ear there are a hundred grains. God multiplies for whom He wills. God is vast [in providing], knowing.* (2:261)

> *The likeness of those who spend their wealth seeking God's pleasure and for the strengthening of their souls is like a garden on high ground. Heavy rain falls and its produce is doubled and, when the heavy rain does not fall, there is still dew.* (2:265)

All kinds of generosity require letting go of fear. To accept the barter arrangement, a degree of faith in other people is necessary, and in the ultimate, if not always immediate, likelihood of fairness. Accepting the principle of abundance is different in that it involves letting go of the need to stockpile one's resources, whether those resources be emotional or material. While the logic of bartering for smooth familial and communal functioning can be easily explained, if not always easily implemented, the logic of giving up one's stockpiles is shakier and is certainly not a "natural" impulse in human beings. As the Qurʾān says, *Mankind is ever niggardly* (17:100). Generosity is a trait, however, that can be culturally or individually conditioned to some extent.

The word *birr*, a word that comes from the same Arabic root as the word for a wide open space, *barr*, is a word used in the Qurʾān to describe the human quality of kindness and generosity that requires discipline: *You will never attain "birr" until you spend of what you love* (3:92). Giving up one's stockpiles is difficult but ultimately feels more expansive than clinging to one's emotional resources and material possessions. It is a discipline that has its rewards.

Al-Qushayrī's text mentions a third level of generosity, *īthār*, which is the preferring of others to oneself. He relates the story of a Sufi who is aware of a hidden niggardliness in himself, even though he is considered generous by others.

> Abd Allah ibn Jafar was told, "You lavish much when you are asked—but you won't ask the slightest thing from those to whom you have given!" "I give my money freely," he said, "but I'm stingy with my mind." Abd Allah ibn Jafar went out to his country estate. He stopped by somebody's palm garden where a young black slave was working. When the boy got his food a dog came into the enclosure and approached him. The boy threw him a piece of bread and he ate it. Then he threw him a second, and a third, and the dog ate those too. Abd Allah ibn Jafar watched this. "Young man, how much of your food meets this fate every day?" he asked. "As you see." "Why do you prefer this dog to yourself?" "This is not dog country," the boy said. "He must have come a very long distance out of hunger, and I hate to turn him away." "And how do you fare the day?" "Today I will go hungry." "Am I scolded for too much generosity?" Abd Allah ibn Jafar exclaimed. "This fellow is much more generous than I am!" So he bought the youth, the garden and the tools that were in it, then freed the boy and gave it all to him.[29]

While there is a logic to bartering and sharing one's resources, preferring others to oneself makes little sense:

> I heard Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami say…that al-Daqqaq said, "It is not generosity when the one who has gives to the one who has nothing, but it is generosity when the one who has nothing gives to the one who has."[30]

Although people can be trained to act as if they prefer others to themselves, as in the cultural conditioning of gender and classes, the conditioning runs only so deep. The kind of generosity described here, preferring others to oneself, is not disciplined self-denial but effortless, weightless selflessness. Note the wording in this quote from the Qurʾān, which describes those who helped the refuges fleeing Mecca for Medina in the early years of the Muslim community:

> *Those who made their abode in the city and in faith before [the refugees] love those who emigrated to them. They find no need in their hearts for what has been given them and prefer [the refugees] to themselves even if they are themselves in dire poverty.* (59:9)

Those who are themselves in dire straits *find no need in their hearts for what has been given them*. Given the niggardliness of the human soul, it is difficult to imagine how one would not feel one's own need in a circumstance of not having. But the feeling of preferring others to

oneself is a feeling that most people have had a taste of: it is the feeling one has towards another in the state of being in love. In the state of being in love one feels an effortless and pleasurable selflessness that does not feel like renunciation or negation of desire. The vortex of self-interest has been calmed and, instead of feeling like grim self-denial, the feeling is playful. The "insane" person who has been freed from the niggardliness of his soul feels more pleasure, not less, even as he accepts the reality of suffering, his own included. ʿAṭṭār writes

> A madman rides about on a hobby-horse with a smile on his face and cheerfully singing like a nightingale. Someone asks him: "Why are you riding around so quickly?" He answers: "I have a craving to ride all over the world before they chain my hands and feet, and not a hair on my body can raise itself any longer."[31]

Al-Qusharī presents the different kinds of generosity as a progression, legitimately so, since each degree indicates a deeper ability to put others before oneself. But in the daily struggle with our interactions with others, the reality seems to be that there are moments where one is capable of giving freely out of what one has and other moments where one can barely manage to act with basic decency, if that. The moments in which one experiences preferring another to oneself are rare but defining. Caretakers are often given the advice to take care of themselves, which is good advice. But the difficulties of caring for the chronically ill are not fully addressed by this advice—something more is needed that acknowledges the burdens of seemingly unending demands and struggles, and one's feelings of inadequacy in trying to respond to them with at least a modicum of grace. The Sufi writings quoted above offer an elegant aesthetic for behavior, one which accepts human weaknesses while pointing toward unexpected possibilities.

To return to the issue of the systems and organizations we have for providing care and distributing resources, it is hard to imagine a social structure that could function like ʿAṭṭār's madman. The levels of generosity that al-Qushayrī mentions, however, suggest that the virtue can be realized in different ways at different times. It is entirely possible to develop organizational structures that encourage and foster responsiveness towards others; caring for the well-being of others cannot be forced but it can be nurtured at all levels of a hierarchy and in all the nooks and crannies of bureaucracies. While organizational change works best when it is initiated and supported by those with the most power within the organization, it is also possible for any individual at any point in the system, including the petitioner in need, to choose to act with generosity. Every person who has power over another person (and, if we take these stories to heart, there is no such thing as a person without power) has the choice at every moment to exercise that power for self-interest, for justice, or in gratuitous acts of generosity.

The Presence of God

We began with a dialogue between God and human beings at the end of time, in which God asks the children of Adam why they did not care for Him when He was ill, hungry and thirsty. It is a dialogue that addresses the problem of looking for God in the wrong places by suggesting one location in which God can always be found. God locates His presence precisely in the point where the corporeal and emotional vulnerability of being human meets the anxious, greedy and selfish human characteristics that so horrified the angels. To turn away from the discomfort of the moments in which one is asked to respond to the suffering of others is to turn away from the presence of God, thereby dimming one's potential as a human being. Sanāʾī says,

The person who does not turn their face towards the Real—
consider everything they have and know as an idol.
Anyone who turns away from the presence of the Real—
I cannot, in reality,[32] say that this person is a human being.[33]

In the face of suffering and in being asked to respond to the needs of others, one could ask where God is but maybe that is the wrong question. In the end, as Sanāʾī says

You are you—
from this comes kindness and enmity;
you are you—
from this comes faith and ingratitude.[34]

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[1] Quoted in William A. Graham's *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or* Ḥadīth Qudsī (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 179-80. Graham notes the resemblance of this divine saying to Matthew 25:41-45 in the Bible. The translation here is Graham's, with slight modifications.

[2] A *ḥadīth* (pl. *aḥādīth*) is a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. A *ḥadith qūdsī* is a saying attributed to Muhammad in which God Himself is said to have spoken.

[3] Two excellent introductions to the history and thought of Sufism are Carl W. Ernst's *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997) and Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[4] This article relies as heavily on conversations and experiences I have shared with others, of whom I would particularly like to acknowledge Tahira Sands, Leila Ispahany, Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, and Samuel Conway.

[5] The translations of the Qurʾān here are drawn from those of A.J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Macmillan, 1975); Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984); and Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley's *The Noble Qurʾan: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* (Norwich: Bookwork, 1999).

[6] Farid al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Muṣībatnāma*, 8/4. Quoted in Helmut Ritter's *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār*, Translated from the German by John O'Kane with Editorial Assistance of Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 255. I have made one slight change in O'Kane's translation, substituting "madman" for the word "fool". The Persian word here is *dīvāneh*.

[7] Patients' Bill of Rights, New York State Hospital Code Section 405.7. Posted throughout hospitals in New York State.

[8] Joseph A. Amato, *Victims and Values: A History and a Theory of Suffering* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1990), 89.

[9] The term "theodicy" was coined by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d.1716) to refer to "the attempt to demonstrate that the divine justice remains uncompromised by the manifold evils of existence," Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over Al-Ghazālī's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3.

[10] See, for example, Brian Hebblethwaite's *Evil, Suffering and Religion* (London: SPCK, 2000), 5-6.

[11] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Translated and Annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 287 (Part II, Book V, Chapter 4).

[12] Aḥmad Ghazzālī, *Sawāniḥ: Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits*, Translated by Nasrollah Pourjavady (London: KPI Limited, 1986), 44.

[13] The word translated here as "trouble" is *kabad*. Muhammad Asad notes that it comprises the concepts of "pain", "distress", "hardship", "toil" and "trial" (*The Message of the Qurʾān*, 952 n.3). The word for liver, *kabid*, which comes from the same Arabic root, is considered the source of enmity in classical Arabic. See E.W.Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 2:2584.

[14] *Munājāt: The Intimate Prayers of Khwājih ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī*, Translated by Lawrence Morris and Rustam Sarfeh (New York: Khaneghah and Maktab of Maleknia Naseralishah, 1975), 39. The *Munājāt* have also been translated into English in *Ibn ʿAtaʾillah: The Book of Wisdom and Kwaja Abdullah Ansari:*

Intimate Conversations, Translated by Victor Danner and Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

[15] Quoted in Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, from *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyāʾ* of Abū Nuʿaym Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī (d.1038), 10/270; and *Sharḥ al-Ḥikam* of Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbbād al-Nafzī al-Rundī (d.1390), commentary on the text *al-Ḥikam* of Abū'l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Sikandarī (d.1309), 1/32.

[16] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 6:1733-35. Translated by William C. Chittick in his *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1983), 57.

[17] When the Qurʾān criticizes entire communities, it is these beliefs, attitudes and actions that are being criticized. The words "one who submits" (*muslim*) and "one who is faithful" (*muʾmin*) are used to describe adherents of several faiths. Similarly, Sufi writings are replete with references to the idolatry, hypocrisy, and infidelity Sufis locate within themselves.

[18] *Shirk* means to associate anything or anyone with the only divinity, which is God.

[19] Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2:2620.

[20] Translation by Peter Lamborn Wilson and Nasrollah Pourjavady, *The Drunken Universe: An Anthology of Persian Sufi Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987), 65.

[21] The Persian word translated as "humility" here, *zārī*, also means "lamentation" or a "cry for help".

[22] Ḥakīm Sanāʾī, *The Walled Garden of Truth*, Translated by David Pendlebury (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1976), 18. Pendlebury's work is an abridgement and revised translation of Major J. Stephenson's translation and edited Persian text of *The First Book of the Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970). This selection from Sanāʾī appears on pages 42 (English translation) and 27 (Persian text) in Stephenson's work.

[23] The concept of "thinking well of God" (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) is a common expression in Sufi writings. See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 118, 128.

[24] Pendlebury, *The Walled Garden of Truth*, 23; Stephenson, *Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat*, English 59, Persian text 37. I have modified Pendlebury's translation here.

[25] Anṣarī, *Munājāt*, trans. Morris and Sarfeh, 45. I have made slight modifications in the translation. For the impoliteness of pointing out God's part in the moral failings of human beings, see also *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, Translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1972), 1:1488-1494.

[26] Sanāʾī, *The Walled Garden of Truth*, Trans. Pendlebury, 17. See also Sanāʾī, *Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat*, Trans. Stephenson, 37 (English translation) and 24 (Persian text).

[27] Sanāʾī, *The Walled Garden of Truth*, Trans. Pendlebury, 26. See also Sanāʾī, *Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat*, Trans. Stephenson, 63 (English translation) and 40 (Persian text).

[28] Abū'l Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Sufi Book of Spiritual Ascent (Al-Risala al-Qushayriya*), Translated by Rabia Harris and edited by Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: ABC international Group, 1997), 231-2.
There is another English translation of this work by Barbara R. von Schlegell, *Principles of Sufism* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1992).

[29] Al-Qushayrī, *Sufi Book of Spiritual Ascent*, 235.

[30] Al-Qushayrī, *Sufi Book of Spiritual Ascent*, 240.

[31] Farid al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Ilāhināma*, 14/20. Quoted in Ritter's *The Ocean of the Soul*, 254-5.

[32] There is a play on words here in repeating the word Sufis frequently use to refer to God, "the Real" (*ḥaqq*) with the emphasis of the phrase "in reality" (*ḥaqq*).

[33] Sanāʾī, *Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat*, Trans. Stephenson, 29 (English translation) and 18 (Persian text). I have modified Stephenson's translation here.

[34] Sanāʾī, *The Walled Garden of Truth*, Trans. Pendlebury, 19; and *Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat*, Trans. Stephenson, 43 (English translation) and 28 (Persian text). The translation here is my own.