

A Conversation on Compassion With Omid Safi

Transcript of Omid Safi on Radical Love, Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition

Leslie Langbert: So, I've been spending some time with *Radical Love*...

Omid Safi: There you go! There you go. Your fellow friend.

LL: Oh, it's such a beautiful, beautiful friend and I want to talk about this treasure that you have translated and offered to the world and all of these beautiful translations from the Q'uran and from Rumi and from Hafez and all of the great Sufi mystics.

OS: Yes!

LL: Tell me a little bit about what has drawn you to this labor of love, because it really feels like that's what it is, a gift.

OS: It is actually in an even more literal way than I think sometimes people would imagine! So you know I think sometimes as writers and artists and people who are involved in any kind of creative work, you know, we end up having to construct almost an autobiography, for whatever comes through us and you know I think sometimes there's a tendency to want to make it very linear and very purposeful and, you know, as if we just sat there with full intention and had an outline of how the process was supposed to lead one step to the other to the other.

And the truth of the matter is that you know this this wonderful little collection *Radical Love* didn't happen that way. And it is very much a book that I never expected to write. And it wasn't even actually intended as a book.

It's a love story.

So... I got married three months ago...

LL: Congratulations!



OS: Oh, thank you! Thank you. My wife is Swiss, and she lived in Switzerland and I lived here and we had been friends for some time and we share an interest in in the path of love.

And it was a, you know, it was a friendship that we were walking parallel long distance and occasionally I would fly there to see her. She would fly here to see me and you know the love was blossoming and unfolding. And so, you know, she's very non-materialistic in the way that many Swiss are.

The only thing that she asked me for was that every couple of days, she would ask me to sit down with this amazing treasure of thousands of books from Rumi and Hafez, and the Q'uran and the Prophet Muhammad and all these great love mystics around me and go through them and find a couple of lines and to render them from the original Arabic and Persian into English in a way that preserved the fire and the spark and the sparkle of the original.

And so I would sit down and you know kind of immerse myself in these texts and every few days I would find a line or a poem or a story that seemed really worthy of her and this love that was coming and already here. And, I would translate them and send them to her and she would look them over and we would have a little discussion about them. And then after about a couple of years had gone by, she said 'you know my love. These are so striking and they have really touched my heart and I think they would really touch the hearts of others. So why don't you think about publishing these?'

And I was like, 'oh, no, no, no, no. These are really just for you, and for us', but she kept insisting that she has been reading a lot of the other collections out there and that none of them had really touched her. The way that this particular one had...And so, you know, I said, 'well, they belong to you. And if this is what you are asking for, then by all means'. And so, quite literally, the process of writing this book was scrolling back through old messages, love letters and text messages and emails and cutting and pasting and cutting and pasting and next thing and you know maybe adding a little introduction, adding a couple of stories and poems here and there, but it was basically already done.

So of all the books ever written in my life, this is the by far the most joyful and it really doesn't feel and didn't feel like work. It was just, you know, love letters that you go back and you collect and then you share with others.

LL: Wow. That's so incredible! I have to say I had no way to expect that would be the answer for why you've developed this! What an incredible,

generous gift for all of us in the world - to read this, that comes from clearly such a deep love for each other.

OS: Yeah, thank you! Thank you very much. Yeah, and you know I think as, sometimes you get to a certain point in life, and you begin to think about what do we want to spend our life doing? And what do we want to spend our life kind of working on? And I think, you know, for me, it was partially a matter that life is so short, and it passes so quickly, and so wanting to be more intentional about life and wanting to have it be something that will touch, hopefully, the hearts of others. And that, you know, in some ways you release that into the world and into the universe and hope that what has come from your heart ends up touching the hearts of others.

Exploring ideas of 'You' and 'I' in the words of Rumi

LL: Yes. There are so many beautiful poems that you've translated here and one that really struck me yesterday when I read it is one from Rumi called 'Our Brokenness'. It says:

*You're clutching
with both hands
to this myth
of you and I.
Our whole brokenness
is because of this.*

There's such profound, deep wisdom in that. And for me, it's...I feel like I don't have words, but I have heard you speak so beautifully and so eloquently many times and just wanted to open our conversation a little bit about that.

OS: Yeah. Thank you, thank you. You know it's interesting that's the one that you went to because the experiences that I've had in my own life, and part of the reason why I'm sometimes drawn to these kinds of poems as opposed to others is that of course you know none of our lives are ever and have ever been this, you know, smooth peaceful ocean of bliss. And, you know, every ocean also has waves and ups and downs and occasional storms and sometimes it comes crashing to the shore and the waves scatter into 1,000 droplets that return back into that same ocean. I think my own life has certainly been that way. There have been some very stormy times and brokenness, as well as healing.

So one of the things that Rumi says that I've been very touched by is that every heart breaks. But what a difference there is between a heart that simply breaks and sometimes a heart breaks open. So if we're going to break - and we will - or we have, and where we are may be that it's a breaking open...Maybe it's an expansion and a discovery of what has been on the on the inside.

And as far as the beautiful poem that you had so kindly chosen and read about our brokenness... that this is because of how we clutch on to these notions of 'you' and 'I'...I think the first thing that I always say when we're discussing these kinds of poems is I'm also very mindful that there are some of us reading these poems, who have gone through or are going through perhaps an abusive relationship where our very notion of who we are, has been assaulted.

Sometimes in those relationships in that context, when someone is stomping on your sense of the core of who you are and what you are, actually to insist on your 'you-ness' and your sense of selfhood is a revolutionary act of survival.

Whether we're speaking of us as individuals or us as a people as a subgroup of humanity that could be about us as women, as people of color, as queer folks, black folks, poor folks, immigrants, as Muslims, as Jews. So in that sense, to actually insist that no, there is an integrity to who and what we are... that's a beautiful and blessed thing. And I think it's also important to save a space where in a different conversation that can also be acknowledged. And if we can somehow acknowledge that and then also come back to this other language that Rumi is talking about here, to this myth of a quote, you, and a quote, I, and how this results in a brokenness. I think what he's talking about there is something a little different. it's a different story, it's a different love story.

A book can have different chapters and each chapter can have different stories and sometimes I think, you know, we get ourselves in a situation, I tend to sometimes notice this with relationships. Sometimes when the sheen and shine of newness has worn off and you're sort of settling into what seems like a mundane kind of existence and what was perhaps once a passionate love story feels like it has become 'the great accounting firm' of you and I. And when you pay attention to the conversations that people have... And again, I'm not speaking here, theoretically, like this is also been my own experience in life. Sometimes it feels like you know we are each of us is keeping this itemized list of everything that the other person has done

wrong. 'I took out the trash last night, and it's your turn to do the dishes tonight, and I did this, but you did that, and I can produce for you a list of everything that you have done that has annoyed me in chronological itemized, reverse order', you know, and I did.

I mean sometimes jokingly, and to take the edge of the pain of these conversations, I am a huge fan of the musical Hamilton, and I try to find as many ways of sneaking Hamilton into Sufi poetry as possible...When Alexander Hamilton and Vice President Burr are having their debate, there is a line in which Burr goes, "you need to cite a more specific grievance" and Alexander Hamilton goes, "Here's an itemized list of 30 years of disagreements" and Burr goes, "sweet Jesus!" (*both laughing*)

You know, we laugh at that, but we do this in our own life as well. We do this in our own love stories, our partnerships or marriages or friendships. And that's I think what Rumi is talking about this myth of a bounded notion of a 'you' and a bounded notion of an 'I', where it's a zero sum game where happiness, bliss, joy, compassion, love are finite. And my happiness can only come so far as the extent of where 'I-ness' and where 'Me-ness' ends and you perhaps have that same notion.

And I think what he's talking about is, but what if rather than me being a drop and you being a drop, we were actually both able to experience ourselves as part of the ocean. And what if there was no notion of a bounded idea of me and a bounded part of you? But we could see our souls mingling together as part of this unity that we have always been, and what if we came to see joy and bliss and love and compassion as being infinite, and actually coming from a more sublime and more subtle realm? And we're participating in that. And what if at that level, we actually came to see that what causes pain, what causes suffering is precisely this notion that there are certain things that are mine, and only in as much as they are mine can I take pleasure in them.

I oftentimes watch 'The Lord of the Rings' with my children, which to me is also a Sufi allegory right? And that Gollum character who's looking for The Precious...

LL: Right!

OS: And if he has to kill, if he has to steal, if he has to do whatever to find The Precious. And of course, at the end of the movie he finally finds The Precious as he's diving headfirst into the fire of hell. And even as he is

descending into hellfire, he cannot let go of this bounded notion of clutching onto this 'I-ness'.

And what if we could just let it go? What if we could just let it go, and we could be these drops that merge and mingle and melts back together?

LL: It's so powerful for me... whenever I read Rumi, and to hear you talk about it in this way... it's difficult to describe. I'm wondering if people that will listen to this will feel the way that I do - that there's a sense of something within my soul that is moved by the words.

OS: Yes.

LL: And the feeling that it's not even just the words it's what's behind the words.

OS: Yeah, it's the presence, that I think it's a fire. And I think it's the reason why when we read these kinds of lines or when we are with people who live into these teachings there is that experience of a kind of homecoming for many of us. it's 'I know this. I've sensed this, I know somewhere in my deep long forgotten heart that these teachings are all so true and I have had a memory of once having lived this'.

And certainly, you know, Rumi's not the only one who has this gift, but I think there are some mystics that speak with us through time and space and I would even say through traditions. Rumi was a Muslim mystic, but we may not have come from that background and he was a Persian speaker and we may not speak his language. But when we sit with him, when we sit with these teachings, they move us, they inspire us, they touch our hearts. I have felt that same inspiration when I listen to Dr. King and Malcolm X and Rabbi Heschel and untold female and male mystics from different traditions. So I think you're right. There is something that goes beyond their mere words.

On love, and love being the 'unleashing of God onto this realm'

LL: Yes, yeah.

I've often - I think from a very early age - felt that there are many paths to the same destination and I'm so struck always at the depth of beauty and similarity in the messages of love that come from all of these different traditions and the threads that weave them together. I've heard you speak

about and write about love being 'the unleashing of God on to the world'. I love when I hear you say that. And I want you to talk about it a little bit, if you would.

OS: Yeah, thank you. Well, you know, these are not my words. These are the words of these great mystics that I've had a chance to sit with from the previous centuries and so, you know, I think when it comes to love, especially, there's a beautiful paradox here.

That on one hand, it's almost ubiquitous, right? Half of our songs on the radio are about love. It seems like many of our movies are about love. And there's a whole section in our bookstores that are about how to find love and everything... and I both identify with that as you know someone who is very much as I say, not a hopeless romantic, but I hopeful romantic, I identify with that.

But I also smile a little bit because people talk about wanting to *find* love, and so the amused child in me says, when did you lose love? Who made you lose love? Where did we lose love? How did it happen, my love, that you lost love along the way? And can we go back there, or can we start right here and pick it up again? And ironically, I think what I find is that so many people when they say - and I would count myself among them perhaps at a earlier point in my own life - when they say, 'I'm looking for love'. 'I hope to find love'.

It's because what we've done is that we have narrowed that sense of love to an infinitesimally small definition. That even if we go from all the many shades and hues and colors of love from divine love to love in nature to love from animals and puppies that love us unconditionally and absolutely...And even if we only talk about human love, usually when people talk about wanting to find that love what they're talking about is a romantic love. And even within that a sexual, physical, romantic love sometimes, maybe not always, even in a heteronormative conception.

And so, you know, it's a it's a rather defeatist proposition if you say there are 7 or 8 billion human beings, but we're going to restrict love so that only one of those 8 billion people can give you love. Now, you know, that's a...it's not even finding a needle in the haystack! You have a one in 7 billion chance of finding this person and hope that they feel the same way about you! So I think what our mystic friends do, instead of restricting and narrowing and narrowing to this one in 7 billion definition...



Sometimes the heart breaks and sometimes a heart breaks open to actually open up, and open up and open up the heart. So that you actually realize that we are the fish in the ocean. We are constantly swimming in this ocean of love. And yet we're frantically going 'where's this water? Where's this water? What is this water that everyone keeps talking about?' And at some point, we need an old fish, an old turtle, an old wise soul to come around and to say, 'My Love, the very reason that you're able to swim, the very reason that you're able to look for love is because you are loved'.

And perhaps we wouldn't know that we are so deeply immersed in this ocean unless someone were to pluck us out of the ocean for a couple of seconds. And so you're like 'oh wait, I can't breathe, put me back in!' And then when you drop back then the fish starts happily swimming again. So this is the thing that these love mystics, our Sufi friends from the Muslim tradition do, they say, 'no, no love is not an emotion.' Love is not a feeling. And certainly, love is not this thing that is restricted only to one human being amongst 7 billion. That love, as you said, so beautifully yourself, is this very unleashing of God on earth. It's this very unfolding of the Divine.

It is love that brings us here. It is love that sustains us here. And if we can swim inside this selfless love, this divine love and then the current of this love will carry us back home. And to that extent, to that kind of open expansive generous love, then everyone and everything that we come across can and does offer us a sense of love.

On love and interconnectedness in beloved community

OS: You know we have a very crisp wintery day here. And walking outside and seeing this beautiful snowfall that has fallen on everything... that too is a kind of love. It's a kind of love that covers all, right? The snow doesn't say 'I'm gonna fall on the house but not on the tree'. 'I'm going to fall on the road, but not on this bush.' No, it generously covers everything. Everything looks beautiful in it and we can go out there in this crisp air and take a breath and as the breath kind of enters us and fills our heart and fills our lung and fills our chest. And then that same breath comes out, you know, we feel that sense of communion. That I am not cut off from this nature. That at least for that moment, I'm able to experience the sense of being at one with this air of love, this ocean of love that I'm walking in, swimming in, breathing in.



And you know, I can see a neighbor as I saw in fact, this morning. And my neighbor, you know, wonderful family, lives across the street. They are a beautiful husband and wife, have beautiful children. And I can go to them and when we see each other we smile and we're taking pleasure in this snowfall and in this day when all the kids are home from school. And no, it is not that romantic sexual love that some people have narrowed love to but it is a neighborly love. A neighborly love, and I can look at my own children and listen to the sound of their giggling and the laughter and their joy and I can remember, 'Oh, you know, I used to giggle like this, too!' And I can still remember how to giggle like this and there is the joy. There's a joy in something as elemental as snow that I want to remember to live, and to live into.

And then, you know, perhaps I can take my puppy, whom I love and I love to see. And that's another kind of love. He gives unconditional love and we can give love back and as I'm walking the puppy in the snow I can come across someone from the neighborhood that I don't know. A stranger. And then I, we, exchange a smile and couple of words. A pleasantry about, you know, we both have a puppy, and we were walking in the snow and the puppies are grateful and delighted and then I remember that in the Torah, in the Gospels, and in the Quran, we're told to love the orphan, the widow, the stranger, as ourselves.

That the love of a stranger is also sacred love.

And, you know, certainly we as a country are struggling right now mightily in terms of how to love the stranger. We're struggling, how to love ourselves, we're struggling, how to love our families, our neighbors, but we're specially struggling... and you know one way that you could translate that word stranger...Is refugee.

So for all of us who claim to be somehow people of faith, people whose idea of love is inspired by our great faith traditions. Well, this is a measure of how do we live into our faith. Do we build walls? Do we build fences? Heaven forbid, heaven forbid...do we release tear gas on a stranger's child?

Or do we welcome? Do we extend a hand, do we go to this border and say 'I have come to you with food and clothes and a shelter'? Because I have to love you as I love my own child because I recognize how you love your child, the same love that I have for my own child.

There's a way of being together that has to be rooted in this love and this compassion.



To go back to that poem, this great myth of a 'you' and an 'I' and the whole brokenness that can come when we see the 'you' and 'I' as separate, right? How can I be me? How can I be fully who I'm supposed to be if you don't get to be who you are fully supposed to be? How can I look at my beautiful children and say, all I have ever wanted for you is to have food in your belly a roof over your head, dignity in your bones and to know that you are fully loved...and then how can I look at another child and say that you deserve anything other than that? So I think, just as we don't want love to become so individualized, so sexualized, so only restricted to the realm of the physical...We also don't want compassion and love and tenderness and mercy to be purely an individual act. Like these are also communal and this love, this compassion radiates out like the sun. It has to. And the sun like the snow has no boundaries. It has to keep shining and it shines upon all and warming offering warmth and kindness towards all.

So, you know that beautiful poem that you cited about our brokenness and there is a very similar one also in the book that I come back to again and again. In fact, I like it so much that my wife and I included it in our wedding vows....It's that one is the 'You and I' one. It's a very simple poem, but not only could we, as friends, could we as romantic partners, as families, as neighbors live into them as a nation, as a human community, we could establish this as the very basis of our social ethic and that says this lovely little poem:

*You and I
Have to live
As if you and I
never heard
of a you
and an I*

You and I have to live as if you and I never heard of a you and I. So I think, you know, these are amazing teachings, light filled teachings. And there's so much that we see kind of around us that can so easily fill our hearts with sadness and with brokenness, but we're also called to be people of faith and of hope. And I think sometimes it's in the middle of the darkness. There we remember to look up and to see the stars and we can see them even more clearly there. And I think for me, these teachings of love from people like Rumi and others are like the stars that offer us light and guidance.

LL: Ah. I agree. I'm listening to you and I'm feeling so many things. I'm feeling this tremendous sense of joy and gratitude. Gratitude because you



are just lit from the inside out, and I'm so deeply moved by everything that you've shared. It resonates on the deepest levels, like you said earlier in the conversation. You know, it's sometimes this reminder of 'I've lived in this way before'.

OS: Yes, yes. That's right. And we can live this way again. And I think sometimes what friendship with real compassionate living is. It's that willingness to keep creating an opening so that when we come together, we can be like this, we can have these conversations we can welcome the fullness of who we are into each other's presence.

Illuminated Tours with Omid

LL: I'm sitting here talking with you, wishing that I could hang out with you all the time. And speaking of having an opportunity to hang out with you and learn with you, I understand that you are leading amazing spiritual journeys and have one coming up to Morocco.

OS: We do, we do. This is one of the most joyful things that I get to do every year. I would say, you know, leading is far too generous of a word. I would say, creating an opening and an invitation for people to come and to bring their fullness and their wholeness and their brokenness in the way that we've been talking about, into some time for us together.

And the extraordinary thing is that I used to think that 'oh we're going over there to see things', and we do. We certainly do, we go to Morocco and Turkey, so far. Someday we might go to India, possibly to Iran someday, but right now it's Turkey and Morocco. The program is called Illuminated Tours. Anybody is welcome, they can go online and I think the website is illuminatedtours dot-com and they can read about it, they can contact us there. And it's basically a small intimate group where we go and we have this shared commitment to use the 10 - 12 days that we have together to grow into this life.

People keep asking me, 'Omid, you've gone back to Turkey 40 times! Why do you keep going back?' and I say, 'well, I might have gone 40 times, but I haven't gone 40 times with this group of friends'. Who don't know yet that they're going to be friends. None of them know each other until that first night, and then they arrive and I keep telling them with a little bit of a mischievous smile, 'you know, in 12 days you're going to be crying at the thought of leaving'. And they sort of look at each other like 'seriously, with these strangers?' and it happens year after year after year and it's not

anything that I do, or that the place does it is really that intention and that fullness that people are bringing with them. Simply that. So yeah we go we go on site, you know, I offer and other experts come and they offer beautiful little lectures about the history and the current culture and the art and architecture, music we meet with amazing artists and musicians.

And that's certainly a highlight of the program, but it's also that we read books like *Radical Love* and Rumi's poetry and we sit in this circle and we share our own reactions and responses to them. And I find that every year when I go it has a healing and a rejuvenating impact on my own heart, and I hope that it has the same for the hearts of others. And so, yes, consider this an open invitation to anybody who's interested in joining us.

LL: Sounds incredible. I have so, so deeply enjoyed this conversation with you. We talked in the beginning about how here we are, a couple of kids that were born in Jacksonville, Florida...

OS: There you go.

LL: Like ships in the night, moving to and from Jacksonville kind of crossing a couple decades apart. I have an older brother who's 17 months older than me, and so he's just probably a few months older than you, and he is one of my favorite people in the world. He has an incredible light and energy that radiates from his face, and his eyes, and I've just noticed from the very beginning of this conversation that your energy reminds me of that light. I feel like I'm sitting with my brother. And so in some ways I feel like I'm with my brother from Iran, by way of Jacksonville.

OS: You know, and I think this is the amazing thing, is that the more we allow ourselves to come together in these ways that are from the heart...All of a sudden, you know, after an hour you feel like I know you. I have known something about you and you know me too, like, here are the things that we haven't talked about, right?

I didn't ask you, 'what do you do for a living'? I didn't ask you 'who hires you'? I didn't ask you 'what zip code do you live in', 'how big is your house', 'what car do you drive'... all these other ways of that we usually mark human beings. 'What do you do for a living'. Right? We haven't talked about those things. But we allow ourselves to grow closer through the heart.

And I think these are, these are the kinds of conversations, this is the kind of fellowship that we all yearn for. We're thirsty. I think this is really what we're trying to find.



LL: Yes, yes. Thank you for sharing that with me today. And with all of those that will come to listen.

OS: What a pleasure.