

‘This dance is the joy of existence.’<sup>1</sup>

## Serendipitous Consequences of the Turko-Islamic Gülen Movement

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### ABSTRACT

**L**ike other contemporary social movements, the Gülen Movement thinks globally and acts locally. The historical arc animated by the teachings and initiatives of the Founder reach back into classical texts that are widely accessible to people who are not necessarily religious, nor Turkish, nor even members of the Gülen Movement. Yet traditions and current activities inspire neophytes across time and space; they resonate with their own sense of self and their commitments to peace, justice, and cross cultural understanding.

This paper illustrates this dynamic in three stages. The first part makes the connection between the poetry of Rumi on both Gülen and the movement in terms of vision and priorities. The second part delves into a case study, illustrating why members of the Houston-based Institute of Interfaith Dialog entered into a partnership with the University of Houston’s Graduate College of Social Work, thereby linking its Gülen Institute with the Peacejam Initiative and the Women’s Nobel Laureate Initiative already at the College to promote peace and justice. The third part takes us into the classroom, where students in the Masters of Social Work program (some of whom have traveled to Turkey) see the relevance of Rumi and the Gülen Movement to their own professional development.

Pay attention to those  
 who want to change so badly they cry  
 and dissolve into loving kindness and freedom.

--Rumi, "A Dying Dog," in Barks, p. 333

Scholars postulate that reliance on technological innovations (notably in the field of communications) and organizational interdependencies (particularly transnational boundaries) are integral to collective enterprises that historically foment(ed) social change.<sup>2</sup> Peasant riots, urban uprisings, and revolutions since the early modern period are characterized as "social movements." Hence Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels declared in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that "all previous historical movements were movements of minorities." Two years later German sociologist Lorenz von Stein deployed the term "social movement" in the title of his book-length analysis of popular political striving. J. Franklin Jameson's *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1925) remains a classic in U.S. historiography, a study of changes in social status, land ownership, and beliefs that flowered after the Declaration of Independence. Nineteenth-century abolitionists, feminists, and temperance crusaders relied on newspapers, telegraphs, and alliances on both sides of the Atlantic to effect change; these reform efforts rightly should be interpreted as social movements.

#### FETHULLAH GULEN LAUNCHED A MODERN-DAY SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Theorists distinguish between the vision and *modus operandi* of modern social movements from past ones. Historians and social scientists contend that contemporary social movements assumed novel forms after the widespread unrest and grassroots upheavals that shook the world in the 1960s. Catalysts for change differed from place to place—student riots in Europe, assassinations in the U.S., liberation theologies south of the Equator. With modern-day environmentalism, for instance, the widespread commitment to save

the earth manifested itself not only in autonomous local communities, but gave rise to political organizations like Green parties in Germany and elsewhere. What commonalities, if any, exist among modern-day social movements?

The extent to which “all social movements are born seeking change...engaged in sustained campaigns of collective action to secure claims or other concessions”<sup>3</sup> is the most salient feature. Passion animates modern-day social movements. People get so involved in a specific cause, such as fighting for equal opportunities and rights for women and minorities, that it transforms their ideas about themselves and others. Participants’ engagement empowers them to join kindred spirits and activists equally fervent about remedying inequities--while maintaining their social bonds and jobs.

Second, power, resources, and information in contemporary social movements flow to and from local centers of activity amidst a global network. Social movements typically lack a coordinating board operating through a central bureaucracy. Charismatic figures may draw adherents to a cause, but social movements are less concerned than other societal institutions with grooming successors to take the helm. Bottom-up developments tend to be messy. Commitments vary among volunteers and stalwarts who make up the rank and file. Still, depending on how they respond to a natural disaster or cries for help, movements can grow significantly. Framing the common interest mobilizes grassroots support for reforming conditions at home and abroad.

Third, social movements deploy media to transmit their message, recruit members, and relay information to “insiders” and “outsiders.” Producing and disseminating knowledge, the coin of the realm these days, depends on worldwide mass communication. CDs, radios, videos, movies, television, and computers bring far-away events to individuals everywhere. Ideas that incubate in remote areas can circulate around the globe. Mass media at its best shapes opinions and sways hearts, prompting intelligent discourse and reformist actions.

Contemporary social movements, fourth, level (and sometimes democratize) the playing field. Scholarly critiques diverge concerning the power experts wield in setting agendas for social movements, and disagree about the influence ordinary people have in shaping mass cultures.<sup>4</sup> The debate assumes that individuals and entities must mobilize resources to survive. But how seriously are the voices thundering south of the Equator to be taken? Do pleas from the oppressed have persuasive powers? Can any individual or group striking the right chord mobilize support for collective goods or actions that might directly or indirectly benefit the common good?<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, historically novel paradoxes pervade contemporary social movements. On the one hand, social movements produce a groundswell of civic virtue at the very time in which the perimeters of “the commons” (as demarcated by labor unions, political parties, and state-based religions) are diminishing. Meanwhile, those who wish, say, to reverse global warming face stiff competition from entrepreneurs, evangelists, and social engineers who convey alternative messages through the same media outlets.<sup>6</sup> The salience of “identity politics” obscures as it dominates grassroots interdependencies. The very multiplicity of demands on time and commitments often refract and impede cultivating bonds that might transcend parochial or demographic loyalties.<sup>7</sup> This underscores the first priority of any modern social movement: Noble aims founder without a clarion vision that sustains attention beyond its following.

#### WHAT MAKES THE GULEN MOVEMENT A MODERN SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

Be like a compass:

Stand firm on one foot, well established in the center of the circle and travel with your other foot with people of 72 nations<sup>8</sup>

--Rumi ([www.bostondialog.org](http://www.bostondialog.org))

GM satisfies the same five criteria for a modern social movement just stipulated:

1. *Gulen's message of tolerance and loving kindness offers a vision of change.* "Those who want to reform the world must first reform themselves," declares Fethullah Gulen, identifying "Love, Compassion, Tolerance, and Forgiving" as his building blocks. "Interfaith dialogue is a must today...giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones."<sup>9</sup> Those who want to change the world must first regenerate themselves in acts of loving kindness and generous forgiveness in order to enter into purposive dialogues suffused with a spirit of tolerance for others. Gulen had in mind very concrete goals: (1) to raise people's consciousness, (2) to conjoin religion and science as a counterpoint to materialism and positivism, and (3) recover the power of Islamic tradition.<sup>10</sup> Herein lay the Rumi-esque center of GM's spiritual compass.

GM tries to transform hearts and minds through education: Schools "lay the foundation for a more humane, tolerant citizenry of the world where people are expected to cultivate their own faith perspectives and also promote the well being of others."<sup>11</sup> Justice and human rights languish where ignorance reigns supreme, Gulen argued; conversely, those imbued with the spirit of inquiry, logic, and compassion become engines for reform. Since the 1960s, Gulen Movement participants have established more than 300 learning centers—elementary and secondary schools, preparatory colleges and universities—in Turkey (many in remote, underdeveloped regions) as well as in Central Asian republics, North America, western and eastern Europe, and parts of the former U.S.S.R. with large Turkic minorities. Thanks to high admissions standards and rigorous curricula in languages, sciences and arts, Graduates from Gulen-inspired institutions have won prizes and scholarships for advanced degrees.

2. *The Gulen Movement's translocal and transnational networks.* Gulen described GM as "islands of peace, which we can call invulnerable castles of harmony and stability." He dedicated his article, "A Movement Originating Its Own Models" to "countless educational activists who have gone all around the world to provide quality education and to promote peace between different nations and cul-

tures.”<sup>12</sup> Because most of GM’s initiatives and budgets are determined locally, volunteers at the grassroots level bear fiscal responsibilities for carrying out most educational and social-service initiatives. With one foot firmly on the moral compass, as Rumi prophetically imagined, GM reaches out worldwide, to at least 72 nations.

A movement wherein the parts often seem greater than the whole subjects GM to all sorts of criticisms. Some opponents charge that Gulen has designs to “Islamicize” Turkey’s secular state; local residents accuse officials of Gulen-inspired institutions in Central Asia of favoring the offspring of government officials and the affluent over the children of the poor.<sup>13</sup> Little attention has been paid to grooming Fethullah Gulen’s successor, leaving open how GM will sustain its charismatic leader’s gifts for resource mobilization. GM members, in presenting counter arguments, underscore one of the truly novel features of modern-day social movements: it is possible, even desirable, to privilege autonomous structures over hierarchal power arrangements in order to empower Gulen adherents to negotiate freely necessary terms of endearment.

Translocal strategic synergies afford GM transnational flexibility in times of crisis. A cyclone in Myanmar that left thousands dead and at least a million people homeless in 2008 demanded significant foreign assistance from abroad. Myanmar’s regime impeded relief efforts. Delays cost lives.<sup>14</sup> The Gulen Movement, which had schools in the area, mobilized its global network to deliver food and supplies. Decentralized social movements like GM through its own apparatus can invent new pathways to achieve objectives.

3. *GM is a pacesetter in using the media.* Like other modern social movements, the Gulen community constructed a media network to deliver its message. GM created *Zaman*, one of the most profitable, large-circulation dailies in Turkey. At the same site the movement supports *Today’s Zaman*, which publishes articles on local and international affairs, politics and economics, technology, and science every day for English-reading audiences. In addition to a television channel, a radio station, and an advertising agency, the

Gulen Movement chartered a bank to finance projects in Turkic republics and other outreach initiatives. Various Gulen foundations maintain computer networks and websites to keep members and visitors connected to educational initiatives, opportunities for inter-faith dialog, and social-service activities.<sup>15</sup> GM reaches vast audiences worldwide who rely on the latest technologies for news and information.

Participants in the GM know how to use the media to advance their cause. In a poll conducted by *Foreign Policy*, a distinguished U.S. periodical, Fethullah Gullen was named first among a 100 of the world's foremost intellectuals; the Turkish educator attracted more than 500,000 votes. Gulen, author of five dozen books and cassettes that swayed cohorts of Turkish youth, surely deserved international recognition for his influential ideas on tolerance, love, forgiveness, and compassion. That said, the extent of his acclaim may be due to followers who saw the poll publicized in *Zaman*, a notion that the newspaper's editor-in-chief challenged.<sup>16</sup> In any case, Gulen's media hits bolster GM's credibility—critical in a post-modern world where “the medium is the message.”

4. *GM's mission and operations level the participatory playing field.* In the 1960s, as Turkey experienced large-scale modernization, Fethullah Gulen launched a movement that in a few decades altered Anatolia's social and educational landscape. Graduates from Gulen-inspired schools gained positions in the judicial system, military, government, medicine, business, education, and media. Scholarships were provided to children from disadvantaged families. Insofar as educational opportunities promote social mobility, GM “has a potential of generating significant degree[s] of social and spiritual capital as manifested through its national, regional and global networks, various civil associations, the media outlets, educational institutions which are inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gulen.”<sup>17</sup>

It matters less and less in a postmodern milieu whether a movement starts at the center or periphery of urban hubs. People who, through good works and sophisticated communication, can

persuade others that major social challenges and opportunities cut across heretofore closed ethnic enclaves and national borders can position themselves to transform hearts and summon widespread courage to transcend fears and prejudices. Modern social movements attest to the democratization of access to ideas. The leveling of playing fields gives preachers and teachers in Izmir and elsewhere a chance to be heard.

For so many years, our spiritual life has to a great extent been extinguished; our religious world has become dysfunctional; the tongues of our hearts have been tied by making people forget intense love (ashq) and ecstasy (wajd); we have perverted all minds which read and think into hard positivism; bigotry has been installed in the place of firmness of character...and perseverance of truth.<sup>18</sup>

Even with alien keywords, Gulen's message has gained followers and supporters who have never been to Turkey, are not Muslim, but heed its universal appeal.

5. *GM and the new "Identity Politics"*: Just as social movements have changed since the 1960s, so too have the ways that participants identify themselves as belonging to various demographic groups. Muslims whose families have lived in Madrid for five generations, for instance, struggle to be considered "Europeans" rather than "immigrants" or "outsiders." Blacks and Spanish-speaking peoples likewise hyphenate their names to distinguish their origins from other groups. Gays and lesbians, often outspoken in cities, remain closeted in rural communities and countries. Today's elders are more vital and vociferous than the old were a century ago. A multiplication of political identities affects the composition and flow of social movements. First, there is more cacophony and dissent. Second, even-handed treatment tends to equalize the freedom to speak and act.

Identity politics altered the Gulen Movement over the past 25 years as its influence spread, but the changes have mainly served to reinforce Mr. Gulen's founding principles. GM promotes what M. Bakhtin calls "dialogic" relationships, which build off synergistic

dualisms that never totally coalesce. Dialogic bonds promote several types of discourse. The Movement affords “Muslims a way to live out Islamic values amidst the complex demands of modern societies and to engage in ongoing dialogue and cooperation with people of other religions...an avenue wherein the non-Muslim can join with Muslims in the greater journey of the dialogic quest.”<sup>19</sup>

Fethullah Gulen’s message--blending his reading of classical humanistic texts (western and eastern) and Islam-based spiritual values with the fruits of modernity (through science and technology) while insisting upon tolerance and civility in word and deed—accounts for GM’s diffusion beyond Anatolia. Gulen’s insistence on focusing on common bonds has proven durable in a world torn by division, bigotry, and ignorance.

That said, to claim that the Gulen Movement builds on commonalities does not mean that its principles and strategies resonate universally. Understanding GM’s development as a modern social movement requires us to explore the historical context in which it took shape. This entails examining how Gulen and GM reworked fundamental Islamic values amidst concurrent transformations in Turkey and other nations.

#### AN ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY LIES AT THE HEART OF THE GULEN MOVEMENT

Muhammad, in the presence of Gabriel,  
“Friend, Let me see you as you really are. Let me look  
As an interested observer looks at his interest.”  
“You could not endure it. The sense of sight is too weak to take  
in this reality”.....  
Muhammad stared, senseless.  
Gabriel came and held him in his arms.  
Awe serves for strangers. This close-hugging love is for friends.  
Rumi, “The Private Banquet” in *Barks* (259-60)

References to ancient Greeks, Shakespeare and Bacon, and French intellectuals sprinkle Fethullah Gulen’s speeches. Still, in formulat-

ing his message, Gulen relied primarily on the Qu'ran, the *hadith* (sayings, actions, reactions about Muhammad and companions), and writings from the Sufi tradition (especially Rumi). His explication of these Islamic texts attracted many adherents in Izmir's mosques in the 1960s and 1970s. Gulen's sermons and commentaries also appealed to young people from rural settings whose dreams of middle-class lifestyles were frustrated after moving to cities.<sup>20</sup> GM became a social movement in a nation whose population is 99% Muslim: Fethullah Gulen accepted Islam as a pathway both complementary to and critical of both tradition and modernity. Islam is "the middle way" of absolute balance—balance between materialism and spiritualism, between rationalism and mysticism, between worldliness and excessive asceticism, between this world and the next—and inclusive of the ways of all the previous prophets, makes a choice according to the situation."<sup>21</sup>

Over time Islam has offered many pathways, however. Gulen could have crafted an Abrahamic image based on the lives of Prophets in the Qu'ran-- Moses, Joseph, David, Jesus and Muhammad. Gulen might have drawn parallels between present-day conditions in Anatolia and other Islam-based traditions elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Mr. Gulen reinterpreted the stories, folktales, and faith-inspired texts of his locale, recognizing that at least 85% of all Turks were Sunni and that his most likely followers were familiar with values and mores associated with Anatolian Sufism.

All strands of Sufism celebrate the creation. Sufi teachings lead people to a "God [who] enjoins justice, kindness, and charity to one's kindred,"<sup>23</sup> lifting them into perfect, universal love. A Sufi spirituality establishes "the sacredness of everyday life in the face of increasing challenges to our humanness," observes Kabir Helminski. It is "the integration or synthesis of the mystical and the prophetic consciousness, of ecstasy and practicality, of enlightenment and maturity."<sup>24</sup>

Anatolian Sufism provided an ideal sacred canopy for Fethullah Gulen's ministry of morality and spiritual practice. It penetrated Islam's soul while enunciating those educational principles necessary

for self-critical learning, scientific inquiry and preparing for a life of service. Gulen's two volumes on *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism: Emerald Hills of the Heart* invites followers to reorient themselves to values such as surrender and serenity, freedom and self-supervision, altruism and resignation, wisdom and discernment, poverty and richness as they continue on the journey of life.<sup>25</sup>

The poems and discourses of the poet, mystic and teacher Mevlana Jalauddin Rumi (1207-1273) who lived in Konya remain guides to those ecstatic joys and yearnings found everyday and everywhere in the ordinary. Fethullah Gulen and other observers note that "Rumi has become emblematic of [GM's] position of dialogue and tolerance."<sup>26</sup> Rumi's words transcend time and place (the United Nations proclaimed 2007 to be the Year of Rumi), thus transporting readers and listeners from a particular moment to a dance in the cosmos. Like the depiction of Gabriel and Muhammad, whose eye-penetrating gaze and friendly embrace frame this section of the essay, Rumi presages Gulen's vision of love and tolerance for those who soberly choose to abandon themselves to quaff divine wine. GM entices people to use all their thoughts, senses, emotions, and deeds as they take great risks to recapture universal truths in their lives.

#### TURKEY'S MODERN-DAY POLITICAL ECONOMY ENCOMPASSES THE ISLAM-BASED GM

Listen to the story told by the reed,  
of being separated...  
Anyone apart from someone  
he loves understands what I say.  
Anyone pulled from a source  
longs to go back.

Rumi, "The Reed Flute's Song" in Barks, 17-18

The insights of Said Nursi (1877-1960), also known as Bediuzzaman "the Wonder of the Age," bridge Rumi's milieu and GM's *modus operandi*. Pivotal concepts to Nursi such as "justice" and "self-real-

ization in relation to others” became a conduit “for the transition from tradition to modernity, from oral to print culture, and from a rural to an urban environment.”<sup>27</sup> Having integrated his studies of physics, mathematics, and physics, Nursi despaired when modern sciences were dropped from religious-school curricula during the declining days of the Ottoman Empire. Like Rumi’s reed, Nursi longed for science’s modernizing impact on religion. Nursi’s lexicon shaped Gulen’s vocabulary. GM in its formative years was considered one of several reformist Nur (Light) movements to spring up in Kemalist Turkey.

Mr. Gulen acknowledges his intellectual debt to Said Nursi, although the men never met. As GM formed its own identity, Gulen denied discipleship “in any sectarian sense.”<sup>28</sup> The distancing is especially apparent in the educational sphere: After 1980 Gulen’s listeners founded elite secular schools, staffed by religiously committed teachers. Furthermore Mr. Gulen sought to expand his circle through praxis-oriented results: “Although Nursi was focused on personal transformation, Gulen has focused on personal and social transformation by utilizing new liberal economic and political conditions... to bring just and peaceful solutions to the social and psychological problems of society.”<sup>29</sup> Gulen’s movement, unlike Nursi’s, addressed the challenges of postmodernity. Changes in Turkey’s political economy facilitated and constrained GM’s development.

Turkey’s location as a gateway to the East and West reinforced the Anatolian peninsula’s reputation as a mecca for cultural syncretism and multifaith tolerance not seen since medieval Spain.<sup>30</sup> Its proximity to Greece, Russia, and the Middle East puts Turkey in line of enemy fire while remaking the country’s value to superpowers and in regional alliances. (The struggle for full EU membership symbolizes the extent to which European misperceptions clash with Turkish nationalism.) Episodes of terrorism and bureaucratic malfeasance, threats of military intervention, the Kurdish question and xenophobia, as well as endogenous/exogenous economic swings have complicated the nation’s road to liberal democracy since

Ataturk assumed power in 1923.<sup>31</sup> Instability in Turkey made GM's founder controversial: Gulen has been taken into police custody. Accused (without grounds) of political ambitions, Gulen's views on tolerance, even his meeting with John Paul II, earned him critics.

Turkey's recent history has validated more than hurt GM's reputation as a modern-day social movement. Gulen began reformist calls in the 1960s in a climate permitting political discourse; the nation's youth culture, media network, and voluntary associations became more conducive to forces modernizing the political economy. The 1980 coup suspended unions and purged faculty members, but made it possible for Gulen to advance his education programs.<sup>32</sup> Affluent participants, who were comfortable with Islam and modernity, contributed generously to build schools and underwrite welfare at home and abroad. GM's so-called "cultural third way" that is neither Kemalism nor Islamism but a mix of "Turkishness", Sufi thought...globalization"<sup>33</sup> has flourished amidst Turkey's liberalizing transformation. Gulen successfully carved a niche by articulating a communal vision integrating tradition and modernity—a song to satisfy the longing of Rumi's reed flute. GM joined global voices while imagining anew the values and language of Islam as heard by Turks.

## PART TWO: HOW GM FORGED A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN HOUSTON AND KONYA

Listen to presences inside poems,  
Let them take you where they will.  
Follow those private hints,  
and never leave the premises.

--Rumi, "The Tent" in Barks, p. 99

A forty-year academic suffered a health crisis that nearly killed him. As he recovered, the man took stock of his life. A gerontologist entering Dante's woods saw his survival as a gift from God, an invitation to "follow those private hints." He waited, prayed, and lis-

tened, not knowing what lay ahead. Serendipitously, the man was invited to give a talk at an interfaith conference on “spirituality and aging.” The gathering drew kindred spirits--mostly middle-aged U.S. participants pursuing spiritual dimensions of their beings. The academic felt at home in the midst of estimable persons sharing intimacies about how their inner lives. Eager to learn more about spirituality, he wanted to embark on his own path. The experience changed the man’s life: I know, for I am he.

A cradle Episcopalian, I initially turned to spiritual giants of Anglicanism. It is not surprising that I, who read Eliot and Auden in moments of stress and distress, found the vivid imagery and spiritual longings of George Herbert (1593-1633) especially moving. Poetry stirs my imagination, uplifts my spirits, and makes me long for the Ineffable. My horizons broadened: from Catholic and Orthodox spirituality, I delved into classic meditations from the East. One day a friend gave me a copy of Coleman Barks’s translation of *The Essential Rumi*. I pondered and listened “to presences inside poems.” An ecstatic sojourner and worldly sage, Rumi spoke about serenading the Divine and struggling on earth with intimacy. His verses address the suffering and yearning on the journey of life. I was struck by Rumi’s ecumenicalism: Jesus’s life and ministry is the subject of several poems; he embraces Jews and Parsi as well as Muslims in his fold.

By the time Rumi had become an integral part of my meditations, I had moved to the University of Houston (UH), survived another set of health-related incidents, and begun teaching in UH’s Graduate College of Social Work. I required students in a course on “spirituality and aging” to read Rumi. We drank in his universal message of love, and discussed how a mystic poet might inform their social-work practices. Each time that I introduced Rumi to aspiring social workers required leaps of faith (amidst much doubt) on everybody’s part. I asked students to pick a verse, a quatrain, or a poem from Barks’s collection and tell us what they heard, what they learned. Midway through class I would raise the stakes: I se-

lected a passage that related to my own life history. Forced to trust one another made all of us more honest. The verses of a 13<sup>th</sup>-century mystic pierced the hearts of professionals-in-the-making whose primary mission is to serve others.

Once again, serendipity enters this essay: over lunch a dear colleague suggested that I join her and a dozen other academics on a trip to Turkey. I accepted the invitation at once when she said that itinerary included a stop in Konya, where Rumi taught, planting the seeds for a school for Whirling Dervishes, and died. Surely the trip's most powerful memory was my pilgrimage to Rumi's grave. I stood for an hour, by turns giving thanks for the privilege to meditate in Rumi's shadow and observing others (Muslims, Japanese, Indians, Hispanics, and Anglo-Americans) who had stopped to pay their respects. In a way that I had never experienced quite the same before, I became a citizen of the world, spiritually and otherwise. There was no turning back.

Back in Houston, I met with members of the Institute for Interfaith Dialog (IID), the local GM chapter that had generously underwritten my trip to Turkey. Investigating the connection between Gulen and Rumi, I learned that Gulen, characterized by some as "a modern-day Rumi," considered Rumi a saint. I noted that Rumi was the best selling poet in the U.S. Aslandogan informs us that "the compilation of [Rumi's works by] C. Barks has drawn attention to the spiritual tradition of Islam...The interest in Sufism was renewed after the tragedy of 9/11 as both Muslims and non-Muslims sought to highlight the inclusive, peace and love-focused essence of this faith."<sup>34</sup> Rumi's writings, I realized, provided a platform for interfaith dialog across centuries and continents. If so, then Rumi's legacy should offer common ground for bridging cultures in an academic setting.

As a member of a faculty advisory board to the Institute for Interfaith Dialog, I decided to introduce members of IID's administration to my dean. Both sides realized that a partnership would prove mutually beneficial. From GCSW's perspective there was, after

9-11, a growing awareness that U.S. students and faculty need better understanding of the Muslim world than is afforded through mainstream media. Many students come from Turkey and from Islamic communities to UH for graduate and professional training. The Affiliation and Cooperative Agreement that Institute for Interfaith Dialog signed with GCSW attests to IID's stake:

The primary goal of IID is to help bring together communities of diverse faiths and cultures in order to promote mutual understanding, empathy, peaceful coexistence, partnership, cooperation and community service through interfaith dialog and conversation. IID is dedicated to encouraging the study of the global communities' spiritual traditions from the vantage point of respect, accuracy, and appreciation.<sup>35</sup>

GCSW agree to provide space for the Gulen Institute; IID agreed to underwrite scholarships and other educational expenses that fit the Institute's goal.

Fruits of the partnership were evident even the first year. IID invited faculty and students from UH and other colleges and universities to join business and political leaders at lunches keynoted by Mayor Bill White, former Secretary of State James A. Baker III, and several local Member of Congress. Staff and faculty GCSW attended a banquet marking the end of Ramadan. Perhaps the most ambitious project was the design of a 12-day trip to Turkey that highlighted social services, hospitals, and professional training in that nation. Dean Colby, four faculty, and twelve students (selected by a joint IID-GCSW committee) accompanied Dr. Aslandogan and me on the visit.

## CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF "SERENDIPITY" IN EXPLICATING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Gamble everything for love  
If you're a true human being.

Rumi, "The Three Fish" in Barks, p. 193

Initially it seemed odd that leaders of a social movement originating from a Turkish-Muslim would choose to become partners with a social-work college in Houston. Despite the rapid shift from an agrarian- to urban/industrial based economy, accompanied with upheavals in traditional family networks, there are few social workers in Turkey to deal with social dislocation, mental illness, child welfare, community development, or the geriatric needs of an aging population. The development of social work as a profession in Anatolia does not yet offer the elaborate training, licensing, and credentialing options found in North America, western Europe, or (former) Commonwealth nations.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the history of the Gulen Movement indicates a tendency to “gamble everything for love,” to go about its business in a genuinely human way to achieve its objectives. So its leader did not muster support for his cause by adhering to interpretations of Islam that he had been taught. Instead, Mr. Gulen invoked the Prophetic tradition and Turkish cultural history (including Nursian folktales) to move individuals’ hearts to transcendent concepts of love, peace, tolerance, and forgiveness. Unlike many faith-based organizations in Anatolia, GM flourished in a political economy driven by secularism and modernity; it showed by its achievements that science and technology were compatible with Mr. Gulen’s interpretation of Sufism. There is no way to track GM’s full cadre of participants and volunteer associations, but its founder’s long-term commitments and objectives have been clear and consistent from the outset:

Gulen’s immediate concern is not to achieve changes on the macrolevel; rather he focuses on the spiritual and intellectual consciousness of the individual. He stressed the role that technology and new global networks can play in articulating a newly formed Muslim consciousness, which he feels has a mission to fulfill. He is extremely optimistic about the impact of new information technology in empowering power and consolidating democracy.<sup>37</sup>

Administrators and faculty at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work after due diligence concluded that the opportunities offered by the Institute for Interfaith Dialog were compatible with its own mission. GCSW wants to equip students with the necessary conceptual and technical skills as well as sufficient training in the field to make them able to think critically and to act compassionately in a profession that serves others. The scope of social work in the U.S. and abroad has changed significantly over the past century; it remains underestimated and misunderstood.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless the desire of its practitioners to empower individuals to be "truly human beings" is palpable. I have accompanied social workers as they visited destitute elders and took remedial action; GCSW faculty coordinated relief efforts for homeless people from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina; they teach and supervise students from developing nations for careers that in big ways and small will foster peace and justice locally and globally.

Readers might conclude that a set of lucky coincidences and circumstances brought IID and GCSW together. I suspect, however, that something deeper—serendipity—was at play. Here is how the English writer Horace Walpole (1717-97) explicated the concept: "*Serendipity*...You will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale, called 'The Three Princes of Serendip': as their Highnesses traveled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of which they were not in quest of."<sup>39</sup> Chance occurrences happen all the time, but they rarely lead to formal partnerships between such disparate organizations. In this case a few actors grasped for the universal in the particular, much as Rumi foretold:

A westerner dwells in the west and an easterner comes to the west. The "stranger" is the westerner. What sort of stranger is he who comes from the east? Since the whole world is no more than one house, he has simply gone from one corner to another. Is he not still in the very same house?<sup>40</sup>

There are risks when strangers from the east and west meet. Strangers view each other as aliens. So what makes strangers operating in *terra incognita* take risks?

In my opinion, modern social movements like GM depend in part on “serendipity” to advance their cause. GM’s engine operates at the grassroots level: Volunteers, friends, and supporters in the local community decide how to set priorities and allocate resources. Yet any bottom-up initiative (like affiliating with GCSW) must be congruent with the movement’s broad mission, linking GM’s universal compass with partners’ humanistic traditions (in this case, their classical-democratic values). The Turkish-Muslim originated effort to educate people to promote peace and tolerance depends on the power of ideas and the fruits of global capitalism. For the followers of Mr. Gulen this means deploying pragmatism and idealism, as well as scientific inquiry and normative standards as it redefines tradition for a modern era.

Sometimes ideas conveyed through communication networks go awry. John Kerry’s presidential chances were sabotaged by a book (falsely) impugning his Vietnam-war record and his capacity for leadership.<sup>41</sup> In a world in which many ideas, visions, and books potentially command worldwide attention, sensational lies and cynicism often outsell integrity and truth. Honest, objective messages and integrity can fall flat.

“In Gulen’s writings, tolerance is compassion and compassion is love.”<sup>42</sup> Love, Rumi exclaimed, is the ultimate thing worth gambling for. The turns of the Whirling Dervishes, whose joyful dance animates Rumi’s message that “the nation of love differs from all others/Lovers bear allegiance to no nation or sect,”<sup>43</sup> becomes a metaphor for a modern-day social movement in motion, a paradigm for how its local and global spheres can transform individuals by empowering them to risk softening their hearts for the sake of a wounded world-community in search of comity. Serendipity advances GM’s cause because its mission is so central to the human situation and accessible to anyone receptive to its message.

## NOTES

- 1 Rumi composed this verse for “We Three. See *The Essential Rumi*, trans. C. Barks (2004: 131). Unless otherwise noted, all of Rumi’s verses come from this translation. I wish to thank Helen Rose Ebaugh and Y. Alp Aslandogan for helpful commentaries on an earlier draft of this essay.
- 2 For more, see McCarthy and Zald (1973), McAdam et al. (2001), Tilly (2004), and Achenbaum (2008).
- 3 Amenta (2006): 14, 17.
- 4 Smelser (1962), Aronowitz (1992), and Edelman (2001).
- 5 Luders (2007).
- 6 Measuring outcomes remains problematic. The Roman Catholic Church, the largest and wealthiest social institution in the U.S., cannot count on the faithful adhering to teachings about sexuality and other matters. AARP, the second largest American organization, attracts members through discounts on travel and prescriptions, but cannot deliver its constituency when Congress deliberates policies for the aging.
- 7 Singh (2001), Kenny (2004), Taylor (2004).
- 8 The number “72” refers to verses 2, 19, 21 of Sura 72, which is part of the numerical representation of Rasha Khalifa as the name of God’s messenger encoded in the Qu’ran. The number also has ecumenical import. Jesus sent out 72 disciples (John 10:1); it is also the number of oxen won for booty (Num. 31:38)
- 9 Gulen in Unal and Williams (2000): 244-5, 256; “The [Four] Pillars of Dialogue” appear on p. 253.
- 10 Agai in Yavuz and Esposito (2003): 57.
- 11 Kurtz (2005): 380. Gulen’s views rest on such Sufi educational premises as the need to educate the soul, to conduct education and training with others, and to empower teachers who have the wisdom, guidance, and inspiration to educate those honest and committed enough to change. See Helminski (2000): 32; Michel (2002); and Aslandogan and Cetin (2006).
- 12 Gulen (2004): 210, 213.
- 13 Park (2007): 54. On democratic leaders’ assessment of GM, see Fuller (2007): 59. On Gulen’s mode of servant leadership, see Cetin (2007): ch. 5.
- 14 Goodman (2008).
- 15 Maigre (2007): 37.
- 16 Tait (2008). It is worth noting that the top 10 intellectuals were all Muslim.
- 17 Kuckcan (2007): 193; see also Park (2007) and Cetin (2007).
- 18 Gulen (2005): 26
- 19 Pratt (2007): 406; see also Gurbuz (2007): 104. For the touchstones that reach non-Muslims, see Carroll (2007) and Tuncer (n.d.).
- 20 Maigre (2006); Penaskovic (2007): 414.
- 21 Gulen quoted in Michel (2005): 353; see also Kuru (2005).
- 22 On the Abrahamic Prophets, Schimmel (2001): 118-20 and Smith (1994: 157) on similarities among the teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; On Ismaili history, Virani (2007). Other options existed elsewhere; see “Global Islam” (2008).
- 23 Qur’an 16.90

- 24 Helminski (2000); 181, 222; see also, Smith, 175.
- 25 Gulen (2004 and 2006); see also, Michel (2005): 348; Kurtz (2005): 377; Schuon (1998): 37.
- 26 Hermansen (2007): 64. "We are travelers in the world, writes Mr. Gulen (2005: 100). Rumi "says each individual is like a flute made of a reed separated from its group. We continually groan with the pangs of separation from the real Owner and our native land." Lines of this poem frame the following section.
- 27 Yavuz (2003 and 1999); see also, Krause (2007): 165 and Vainovski-Mihai (20007): 423-4.
- 28 Cetin (2007), ch. 2:13; Atay (2007): 459
- 29 Yavuz (2003): 3; Graskemper (2007): 625); Eldridge (2007): 525.
- 30 Menocal (2002). Mango (2004: 249) sees resemblances among Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Iberia.
- 31 Lovatt (2000); see also Harris (1985) and Keyman (2007).
- 32 Cetin (2007): ch. 4, p. 62; Mango (1994): 14, 24.
- 33 Maigre (2007): 37; see also Aras and Caha (2000), Kiline (2007): 137 and Lorasdagi (2007): 154.
- 34 Aslandogan (2007): 664; see also, Cclik et al. (2007): 249, Gulen (2005a): xv and Gulen (2005b): 100, 303. And Turkish immigrants in Houston remained interested in political developments in their homeland (Balkan, 2008:6).
- 35 University of Houston (2007).
- 36 Bulut (2003); Libal (2008).
- 37 Yavuz (2003): 29; see also Cetin (2007).
- 38 Ginsberg (2001)
- 39 Shapiro (2006): 796. For a theory of "serendipity," see Merton and Barber (1958) and Merton (1985).
- 40 Thackston (1994): 55.
- 41 Corsi (2004) and (2008).
- 42 Schlubach (n.d): 4
- 43 Friedlander (2003): 153.

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