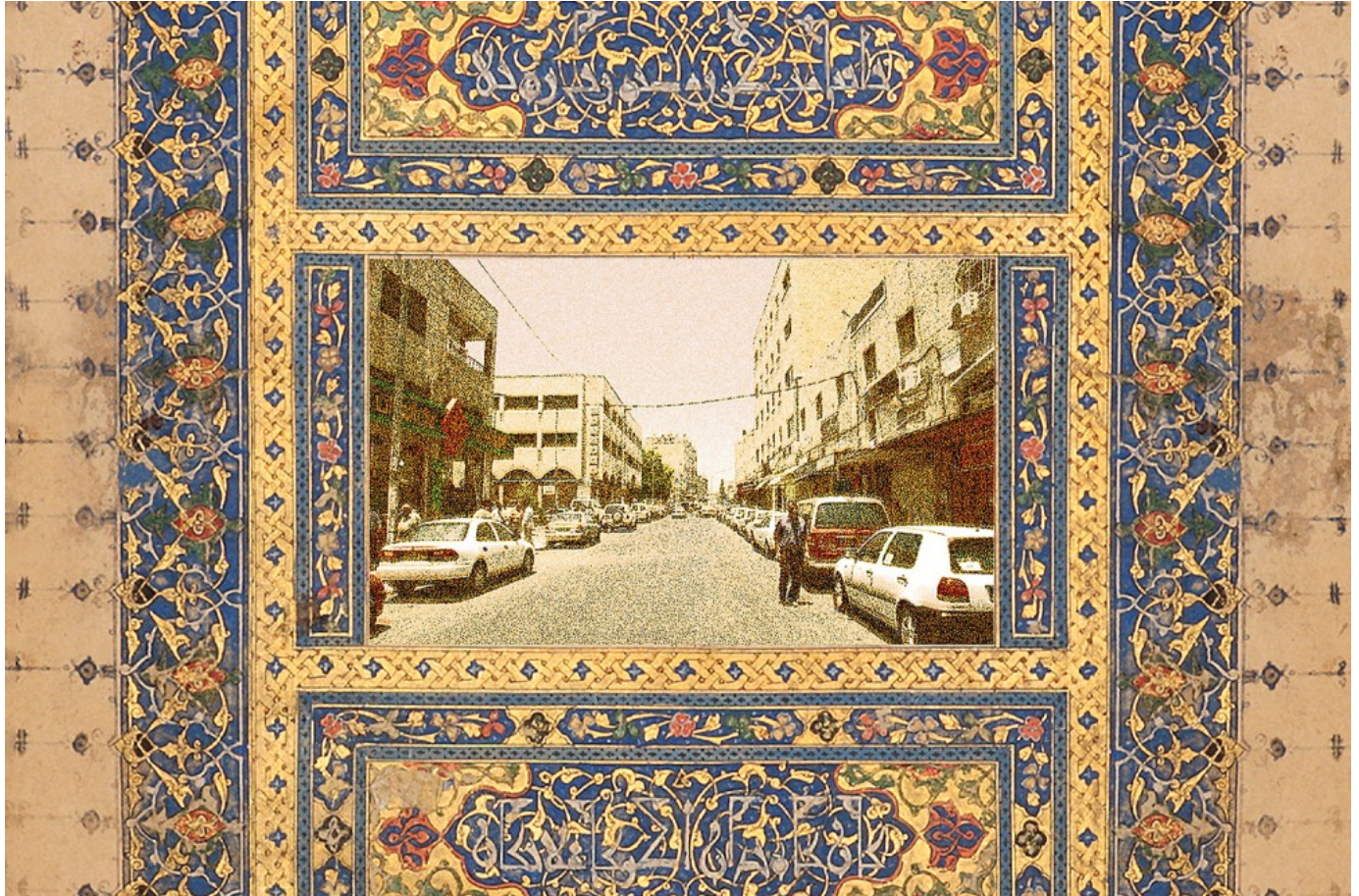


In search of Rumi's live heart

Looking for an Arabic translation of a favorite line, I found myself on a treasure hunt.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue



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I had never exerted so much energy just to send a text. I wanted to tell the man who had been my guide in Aswan, Egypt, that his kind hospitality, his vulnerability and honesty, his genuine love for his home which he'd shared with a stranger had been deeply meaningful to me. I wanted to send a thank-you text. Although I had left Egypt for the next stage of my trip, Mido and I were now regular correspondents on WhatsApp. I wanted to send him a quotation from Rumi that I had been carrying around with me since I had left home. But while Mido's English was very good, I thought it might be a bit silly to send him an English translation of a quotation that

was surely better translated into one of his native languages.

Now at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, I decided, naive about both translation and Rumi, to try to find a translation in Arabic for these lines from the 13th-century Persian poet:

Bring a hundred sacks of gold and God will say, “Bring the heart.” And if you bring a dead heart carried like a coffin on your shoulder, God will say, “O, cheat! Is this a graveyard? Bring the live heart! Bring the live heart!”

“Bring the live heart” had become a rallying cry for me. I had copied these lines into my notebook before I left for Egypt, and I had been using them to encourage myself through encounter after encounter as I traveled. Whenever I got scared or wanted to run and hide, whenever I was challenged by the demands of my pilgrimage, I would repeat these lines to myself. I wanted to use them to express to Mido that he was a person who had brought the “live heart” to me, who had helped me live with courage.

Like many somewhat spiritually inclined Americans of my race, class, and age, I’ve been quoting Rumi for all of my adult life. Or rather, quoting a version of Rumi. My Rumi is winsome, wise, and penetrating. He knows the human heart. He knows my heart. He is almost always ready to speak into the present moment and enrich it. I can open up my copy of *The Essential Rumi* at random and find something that speaks to me.

But this time I was looking for something different. I wanted to take lines that had spoken meaningfully to me in English translation and share them with someone who was closer to Rumi linguistically, religiously, and culturally than I was.

As I started my search for these lines in Arabic, one thing became clear right away: my Rumi is probably 95 percent Coleman Barks—an American poet and translator with a penchant for replacing the word *God* with the word *love* and whose Rumi editions inspired the likes of Madonna.

I don’t say this to belittle the work of Barks and others who have attempted to translate Rumi’s stunning poetry into a contemporary English-speaking idiom. I’m grateful for it. Others have definitely been more critical. Kabir Helminski, a shaikh of the Mevlevi Order of Sufism at the Threshold Society, a Sufi study center in

California, has said, “Americans still have an adolescent relationship with Rumi. It will take some maturing before we move beyond the clichés.” While I think this is basically correct, I also would like to think that adolescence is an important stage of development—not an end point, but a passage.

But as I tried to find a version of Rumi that I could share, I quickly saw that there was almost no way to offer that Barks-inspired Rumi to Mido in Arabic. If I tried, all I would accomplish was giving a heartfelt gift clothed in a cultural misunderstanding. Mido would respond respectfully, I could imagine, but he’d probably be puzzled.

The poem that contains these lines is called, “What is bounty without a beggar?” The version I was carrying around was translated not by Barks but by Daniel Liebert in his 1981 book *Rumi: Fragments, Ecstasies*.

I reached out to Jamie Schillinger, a professor of Islam at St. Olaf College who I knew shared my interest in Persian poets and also spoke Arabic. He told me that Persian versions of Rumi’s work are relatively easy to find, but despite Rumi’s popularity in Egypt, Arabic versions are harder. I would probably have to search pretty hard to find this exact poem in Arabic, he said, but he pointed me to a few possible places to look.

“You should be able to wander into any Arabic-language bookstore,” he said, “and I bet someone would help you find the Arabic version of that poem. The Educational Bookshop in Jerusalem on Salah Eddin Street might be able to help you!”

That was tantalizing. I made plans to go to Salah Eddin Street as soon as possible.

But meanwhile I found a listserv created by Rumi translator Ibrahim Gamard. I learned quickly that he deals with requests like mine all the time. Gamard patiently pointed out that Liebert’s “translation” is actually a version cobbled together from many different Rumi fragments. Liebert himself could not properly be called a translator, because he did not speak or read Persian deeply. What he did was read Rumi in English and then try to give English speakers access to the poet by bringing together onto one page fragments from different parts of Rumi’s grand and comprehensive work, the *Masnawi*. This is similar to Barks’s approach. He creates individual poems out of a work that doesn’t have those kinds of demarcations. Some have called this “re-Englishing” rather than translating.

Gamard pointed me to his online edition of the entire *Masnavi* in English translation, complete with a search function. The *Masnavi* contains six books of poetry, about 25,000 verses. Each verse is a rhymed poetic couplet—in other words, 50,000 lines in all.

While the magnitude of the *Masnavi* was overwhelming, the treasure hunt aspect of this little project was starting to intrigue me. On a couch on the bottom floor of Tantur, on a day when I didn't feel like going out into the Jerusalem heat, I started combing through the online version of the *Masnavi* by keywords, which proved to be a surprisingly effective method. I got completely absorbed in my hunt, feeling a satisfying little inner ping each time my searching revealed a line from Liebert's version.

Thus I found in Book 1, "A loud call was coming (to his ears): 'Come, O seeker! Bounty is in need of beggars: (it is needy) like a beggar'" and "Bounty is seeking the beggars and the poor, just as fair ones who seek a clear mirror" just a page later. I could see where Liebert drew his theme of bounty and beggar and their paradoxical, mutually dependent relationship. I continued through the poem, successfully finding the references for many of the lines scattered throughout the *Masnavi*.

Finally, in Book 5, I found the "live heart" reference I had been looking for, but it was a complicated one. The lines are embedded in a parable that I found difficult on multiple levels. As I studied it, I appreciated Liebert's extraction more than when I had started. The tale that Rumi tells starts with a great warrior named Mohammed Khwárizmsháh who conquers a city called Sabzawár. Khwárizmsháh gets ready to slaughter all the inhabitants of Sabzawár, many of whom are wealthy and self-satisfied. They beg for mercy. They offer him sacks of gold to spare their lives. But he says to them, "I will spare you only if you find a man named Abú Bakr, the true heart."

They find him. No surprise given the theme I was tracking, he is a beggar, a poor, starving heart of a man. They bring this man to the great warrior, who does spare them but also warns them: their great wealth is separating them from their hearts, from the work of real living. In this context the great warrior utters the lines, "Is this a graveyard? Bring the live heart! Bring the live heart!"

After telling this story, Rumi offers an explanation. Khwárizmsháh, Rumi says, "is God Almighty: He demands from this wicked folk the (pure) heart." Sabzawár is

mundane existence or the land of those who think they have no use for God. Abú Bakr is evidence that God's light shines in all living hearts. By becoming poor, we learn the meaning of wealth. By clothing ourselves in vulnerability, we come alive and bring our now-living hearts to God.

I didn't think Liebert guilty of the accusation often directed at Barks. He hadn't created a desacralized Rumi; he hadn't replaced God with sex or spiritual discipline with emotional ecstasy. He had highlighted an important theme in the *Masnavi*: that poverty of all kinds brings God close to us. He had made me feel that passionately. I felt grateful that he had allowed me to see myself as a beggar in search of bounty and to wonder at the mystery that perhaps bounty was looking for me too.

But none of this really led me to something that I could share with Mido. If I shared the whole parable with him, would he think I was calling him the beggar, Abú Bakr? Mido's actual name, like that of many people in Egypt, was in fact Abú Bakr, and it seemed a risky move for an American visiting an impoverished Egypt, impoverished in part because of global policies put forth by my own government, to reference a parable about conquerors and beggars.

The point I wanted to convey was something more like this: I was the beggar, a stranger far from home, who was trying to bring the live heart to my journey and greatly helped by the existence of other live hearts. But the more I probed the original text, the less I felt confident that any translation I brought him would convey this message. Still, I thought, if I could just offer the line "Bring the Live Heart" and tell him that he was a live heart to me, maybe in the tatters of translation and re-Englishing and re-Arabicing something meaningful would be conveyed. And maybe not.

Now that I knew I was looking for the *Masnavi*, Book 5, I decided that the next part of my harebrained scheme to find these words in a language that I could not read or write would be to go to the bookshop in East Jerusalem that Jamie had recommended and see if I could find the *Masnavi* in Arabic.

I was ready to get up off the couch. And maybe I could get one of those delightful little apricot pastries sold in East Jerusalem while I was at it. So I set out with the address in hand: a treasure hunt within a treasure hunt.

I took the Palestinian bus to the Damascus Gate of the Old City and then walked north, using Google Maps to help me find Salah Eddin Street. I walked past a bus

station and along some very high walls. I was excited to see Salah Eddin Street at last. It was hot, the sun was strong, and I wondered if midafternoon was the best time to find anyone at the bookstore. When I found the address and entered what I thought was the shop, I found it full of office supplies. Young Muslim women, obviously students, were buying notebooks and pens, and I waited nervously for a free moment to talk to the proprietor. The shop was small. I felt conspicuous; I couldn't shake the feeling that I was doing this wrong. When I did finally speak to the proprietor, he was kind but unhelpful. Such books, I think he told me, are very rare, and he certainly didn't have any.

I went away in search of my apricot pastry and a bus home. Later—too late for the information to be useful—I learned that there was a second shop with the same name directly across the street that was an actual bookshop. This one was probably the one that Jamie had described, where people gathered to talk about books and poetry, where Rumi might have been recognized and discussed, where someone might have understood my quest.

It remains in my imagination, a little utopia on Salah Eddin Street where I might have been heard and understood, where I might have brought my quest to a successful conclusion.

It was not to be. I did have an apricot pastry. I did find a bus home. But I never found Book 5 of the *Masnavi* in Arabic, and I never gave Mido the lines of the poem. I sent him a much more perfunctory thank-you.

But I learned something crucial about my incessant quoting of Rumi. My Rumi—forged in the fires of cross-cultural understandings, desires, and misunderstandings—can't be repackaged and regifted. Another possible way to say this might be that to find the Rumi of the heart, each of us is on our own. But that also might be the “adolescent” perception of Rumi called out by Helminski. Cross-cultural understanding is a process. If Americans have absorbed Rumi and transposed him into their own key, there is a lot of value in going back and trying to hear the original music. It will be strange. There will be dissonance. But that dissonance is a teacher, every bit as much as Barks's Rumi is a teacher.

I will never read Rumi again the same way. I now know that there are curtains within curtains within curtains where more Rumis are hiding, and those Rumis, too, have something to say. To really hear him and understand him, let alone try to communicate him, is a work for a lifetime.