

Reflections on Sitting with Murshid SAM

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(Editor's note: In late August 2014, pilgrims from Europe met others from the USA and Canada in a trip to the dargahs of Murshid Samuel Lewis at Lama Foundation and Murshid Moineddin Jablonski at the Southwest Sufi Community near Silver City. They were led by Murshid Saadi Shakur Chishti (Neil Douglas-Klotz), Murshid Sophia Onnen from Germany and Murshid Tansen Philip O'Donohoe from England.)

Sitting at the dargah of Murshid Samuel Lewis (Sufi Ahmed Murad) with our group in August, looking out over the expanse of the Rio Grande Valley, I am immensely thankful for the moment, our pilgrims, Lama and Murshid SAM. I reflect on travels to various shrines, dargahs and power spots all over the planet in the past forty years. The portal to devotion and blessing that is the dargah of Murshid Samuel Lewis remains unique.

And, it seems to me, the dargah is uniquely situated at Lama Foundation. Samuel Lewis was arguably one of the pioneers of the movement to recognize the current ecological crisis as a profoundly spiritual one. Before Seyyed Hussein Nasr (one of Murshid SAM's regular correspondents) wrote one of the first books on the subject (*Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, 1968), Samuel Lewis was already traveling around the planet in the mid-1950s with packets of organic seeds and literature about non-petroleum-based agriculture in his suitcase, knocking on the door of every agriculture minister in Asia and the Mideast who would listen to him. He did this after having had his own hands deeply in the soil for many years, among other things replanting the roadside of the California highways to help reduce pollution. He loved Lama's garden and spent much time there, by all accounts.

Murshid SAM (Sufi Ahmed Murad) was also, as one academic called him, the first exponent of "experiential comparative religion." Before Br. Wayne Teasdale invented the term "interspiritual," SAM was already enacting the idea of sharing practice across traditions through the Dances of Universal Peace. They are the first truly interspiritual practice, acknowledging diversity-- with all the tensions it raises--rather than homogenizing it with spiritual newspeak.

Perhaps there is a deeper reason why Murshid SAM wanted to be buried at Lama, not for his own sake, but for what Lama is, or could be. I reflect on how many new age communities founded around the same time have either self-destructed or turned into parodies of themselves, large corporations catering to wealthy new age tourists. A living, ecospiritual, interspiritual community is extremely rare today. The dargah of Murshid Samuel Lewis serves as a symbolic, but very real and living, guarantee on Lama's potential as a school of

life dedicated to, as he said, “practice, practice, practice what others preach, preach, preach.”

Murshid SAM was a bundle of contradictions. He famously said, “I ain’t a saint” (full story too long to relate here). The practical (rather than idealized) life of a mystic is, no doubt, full of contradictions. SAM’s dargah also epitomizes these.

Most of us live in comfortable, protected circumstances that would have been unimaginable to our ancient, hunter-gatherer ancestors. Yet within this voluntarily-chosen limitation, we dream of freedom. Most of us live in some form of civilization—connected globally, hooked up, socially networked—yet dream of wild nature. All along the way, there are choices, gains and losses. There is a cost to everything, and the expectation that we will leave human life without making marks, for better and for worse, is an angelic, yet inexperienced expectation, not a human one. The question is: what kind of mark and for what purpose? The level of joy that we bring to life corresponds with our ability to reconcile these contradictions.

Toward the end of his life, Murshid SAM gave a personal koan: “In my life, God and the devil are on the same side.” He also wrote: “So long as one sees from a limited point of view, one is held in bondage by one’s breath, thoughts and emotions. Wazifas (spiritual practice) destroy the hard-making power of nafs (thought of self), which in enlightened souls becomes identified with the world nafs, in other words, with the Divine Mother, the Goddess Kali. Looking at life from this point of view, one constructs the Universal Sense in one’s spiritual development.”

Many thanks to Murshid SAM for his vision and practice, and to Lama Foundation for remaining an alchemical vessel for many to continue to construct this Universal Sense in our very human beings. This greater Sense of the sensuous could prove to be the saving grace for humanity and for the planet.