

—From *Fiesta: A Journey Through Festivity* by Daniel Stables (Icon Books, London, 2025, pp. 131-135; interviewed 12/24)

A smaller number of young Californians seekers became drawn instead to Sufism, with its message of tolerance and possibilities of transcendence.

One of those was a young man called William Gamard – now Ibrahim Gamard – who I had the privilege of meeting in Konya. Ibrahim has been a whirling dervish since 1976, although Parkinson's disease has diminished his ability to take part in the sema and to play the ney, the reed flute which accompanies the ceremony. I met him in a café in the rose garden outside Rumi's tomb. A small, elderly man with a long white beard, he was frail, physically reduced by Parkinson's, but mentally sharp – and clearly well enough to make the long journey from California to Konya, as he does twice per year: once in September, and again in December for Şeb-i Arûs. He led me to the offices of the International Mevlana Foundation, the UNESCO-accredited organisation which manages Rumi's legacy, and we sat in an upstairs room overlooking the dergâh.

'I discovered Rumi in 1975,' Ibrahim said. 'I read all six books of the Masnavi [Rumi's masterwork], and thought it was the greatest work of religious mysticism I'd ever read. I was living in LA at the time with my wife; our teacher was an Englishman called Reshad Feild.' Feild had earlier been a musician, and a member of folk-pop trio The Springfields, along with future solo star Dusty Springfield.

'Reshad had taught us rudimentary whirling – we made our white

costumes and tall hats ourselves out of cardboard, and whirled every Thursday night,' Ibrahim said. 'In 1976, Reshad invited a Mevlevi sheikh from Konya called Süleyman Dede. We performed a sema with him, and he ritually placed the Mevlevi hat on my head, and I was initiated as a whirler. I've been one ever since.'

Ibrahim is a scholar of Sufism, too – he has translated Rumi's quatrains from Persian into English, and his third book about Rumi and the Mevlevis was published in 2022. He is from the old school of Western Rumi enthusiasts, so enamoured of the words, the whirling, and the states of religious bliss that they engender that he learned Persian and devoted his life to studying Rumi – a far cry from the sanitised Rumi 'interpretations' which have since become million-selling self-help manuals for Hollywood celebrities.

I asked Ibrahim about the annihilation of the ego through sema. Could he explain what such a thing feels like? Is it even possible to put into words?

'After my first sema was over, I stepped outside the auditorium and it felt like the whole sky had opened up inside me,' he said. 'That was my first experience of an ecstatic state from sema.'

Ibrahim is uniquely placed to analyse the effects of sema – not only has he experienced them himself, but he worked for decades as a clinical psychologist. I suggested that the mental state engendered by sema is a kind of trance.

‘Trance is a word that’s very misleading and complicated,’ he said. ‘It seems to explain everything, but really it explains nothing. It’s a difficult thing to explain – the Sufis often liken it to taste. You can’t describe the taste of cinnamon to someone who’s never tried cinnamon. But once you taste it, you’re in love with it.’

‘The best term would be “peak experience”. It’s a very intensely concentrated state. You have to not only hold up your arms for a long time, but on each step you’re praying silently – “Allah, Allah, Allah” – and you’re supposed to be at a certain distance from the whirlers next to you. The skirts are not allowed to touch; you should be whirling at the same rate as the others. It involves tremendous concentration. From the spiritual side of that concentration sometimes come these peak experiences.’

I asked, rather tritely, if these peak experiences could be visions of the Face of God. Ibrahim smiled. ‘That’s too grandiose,’ he said.