

February 7, 2009

Saturday

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Title: [Futuwwah in the Modern Age](#)

DVD title: Futuwwah: The Spiritual Warrior  
Struggling Against the Nafs, Discovering Our Fitrah  
Being a Servant with Dignity and Honor

Because there is so much misery and suffering in the world today, financial misery and suffering, I think it should be very hard for us to be selfish, *insh'allah*. I feel very concerned, and I hope you do too, about the state of the world and the state of the country, and somewhat angry about it. "Somewhat" is an understatement. I guess we all participate in some degree: sins of omission and commission. Now I'm hearing stories in the news like I used to hear from my father's lips about the Great Depression. It made a strong impression on me. My father told the story of when he was a student at Columbia. He was holding down a couple of jobs. He was working in a bank down near Wall Street. My grandfather was superintendent at the New York main branch US post office. My father tells a story of watching people throw themselves out of windows. All of us should remember these poor people and really be thankful for everything that we have, that we have been given, and pray that Allah in some way sustains us so that we continue to serve Him and serve people.

One might say the essence or intention or goal (depending on which stage you are in) of Tasawwuf is a moral and ethical healing. The disease that is being healed is sort of like a parasite that is in all of us. If we are healthy, it is happily munching away; but if we are unhealthy then it starts to really affect us. Perhaps, the best way to say it is a rediscovery

of our own *fitrah*, [because] if you get into the realm of morality and ethics, you get into a cultural paradigm to some degree as well. If, indeed, it is a basis for spiritual development, and because we are born in *fitrah*, we see that for most people, most of us at least for a period of time, we are moving from a state of virtue to a state of vice. Then we see there are certain qualities of human character that seem to be untouched by what is going on in the world. People maintain their dignity. People maintain the honor. People maintain their ethical foundations.

I think of my mother, Minkie, and Ida, and others from this generation of people who maintained *adab*. When you think about this generation of people, or those individuals, you can pretty well know there is a story of struggle somewhere. Our parents worked so hard in my generation to make our lives easy, so we didn't have to go through the things they went through in the Depression, however it was manifest: my grandmother being in steerage on the ship, or the Partition in India and Pakistan, or fighting for social causes. They tried to protect us from those things and did a pretty good job for most of us I think. We find that when one undertakes purposefully, out of necessity often (in the case of my grandmother and others), or out of choice, one undertakes the *jihad al akbar*, often it comes out of a worldly struggle, just to try to understand what is happening.

[One tries to] understand how to deal with the reality you know that you didn't, yourself, do anything to put yourself in that kind of situation of such total loss and abandonment. Yet, there is something about hardship that turns some people against their *nafs*, to struggle against the defective, impaired self, certainly to overcome the negative traits and attitudes. The first stage in this process, according to most Sufic thinking, is entering into this understanding or engagement in *futuwwah*. Futuwwah is usually translated as

spiritual chivalry. The struggle of the *fata*/the spiritual warrior, the *javan nard*/the fighter (as they say in Urdu) is necessary to develop this kind of spiritual chivalry in order to get through this initial stage to create a kind of mental health. [It is] a struggle that actually causes us to be clear, more focused, more intended.

If, by the will of Allah, one manages that and comes to the second level, the second stage of the struggle of the *jihad al akbar*, we discover that by doing this battle with our self we become much more sensitive and intuitive. The intuition, in its development, is somehow linked to values. It's not just intuition about what is going to happen tomorrow, but based on how does one get things right. I referred to the new President yesterday in the *khutbah*. He seems to have some intuitive capability. We don't know, but it seems to be that way, and it's directed toward doing good. There is a cumulative effect with the desire to do good. It's one reason why Sufis gathered in to circles.

In this mode of *futuwwah* and spiritual chivalry, it's like the picture you have of the knights of the Round Table. There is a circle of good people, pledged to do good. Allah rewards those people in the circle with intuition, with a sense of how to change things and make things better. Progressively, a Sufi in *dunya* living in the *'alam al khalq* finds their self becoming more and more involved with things of justice and fairness. Because the journey from the purity of the state of an infant at birth to a person who passes out of this world fulfilled and fulfilling, having moved in this direction of *insan i kamil* is [one of a] person becoming a fair and just person. Just like a chivalrous person is a fair and just person. A person who is a Sufi, who undertakes this *jihad al akbar*, and is even moderately successful at it, becomes very effective in their world, their society, and their community.

Indeed, historically, these people, the names of some we recited tonight in the *sema*, were relied upon by the members of their communities over the millennium and a half I recited names from, for their balance, fairness, and justice. More often than not, there are more people whose names we don't know. People whose names you don't find in the textbooks. I found this quote by Khashari, the 11<sup>th</sup> century Sufi. *“The root of spiritual chivalry is that the servant strives constantly for the sake of others. It is that you do not see yourself superior to others. The one who has spiritual chivalry is the one who has no enemies. Spiritual chivalry is that you are an enemy of your own self (nafs) for the sake of your Lord. It is that you act justly without demanding justice for yourself. It is to manifest a beautiful character.”* We know even from the Christian tradition of the chivalrous knights, there was a code they adhered to. There was a moral, social, and ethical code they adhered to.

In Islam, this *futuwwah* was not just for some militaristic group of people. It was for everyone: the shopkeeper, the calligrapher, the farmer, the imam, the student. It was for everyone. It also knew no gender difference. What has lasted – and certainly a code of conduct was shattered in the last 8 years in the military – is that code of conduct that still survives among the “common folk,” which is a way of acting ethically and behaving in a way that is befitting that we are the greatest creation of Allah Swt: people who strive to live a good life and bring goodness to others; people whose freedom lies in serving others; people who are kind, kind to God, kind with Allah, kind to Allah's creatures, and kind to one's own self.

To be a Muslim chivalrous person, is not to put on a uniform and fight for good or the poor, but to strive in our own servanthood with all of our strength and all of our will. [It is

to] strive to resist certain thoughts or temptations, or the desire to hyperbolize or brag, to elevate one's own ego. At that stage, the seeker appears and is a person of real justice and goodness, a person who reaches out to others with all their effort and tries to assist them. One of the early texts on *futuwwah*, which we have in our bookstore, is by Sulami. He says "*Futuwwah is knowing that others can be forgiven for their misdeeds, but you yourself are always at fault. Everyone and everything else is complete while you yourself are incomplete and lacking. But you show understanding and compassion equally to what appears to be good and bad. The highest form of futuwwah is when nothing occupies you but Allah.*" That means you are serving Allah. You are seeing Allah in everyone. You are seeing the need for Allah's teaching in your advice. You see the need for Allah's guidance in how to do whatever it is you are going to do, whether planting a tree or changing the world.

One of the other saints, *awliyā*, on this topic of *futuwwah* said: "*Anyone who claims to be on this path must show three signs: total loyalty without fear, generosity without any demand or hope for praise, and the desire to give without being asked.*" Maybe twenty, twenty-five or thirty years ago, that would have sounded strange to some of you. But after being on this path and wondering if you ever made any progress, maybe thinking you just do your practices because you are habituated to them (or to not doing them), now when you hear it, even if you don't do many of your practices and it's just from a contact high, just from being in the smoke of those who do, in a place that is dedicated to such strivings, you realize that doesn't sound so strange anymore. This *nafs ammāra*, which is so filled with all kinds of passions, angers, and complaining (kvetching), the self that is so dedicated to avoiding pain and seeking out pleasure, all of a sudden comes up against the reality of an aspect of one's own self that is striving.

One finds using *aql*, one's reasoning and mind, [such thoughts as,] "I'm not who I thought I was. And the Path is much more than what I thought it was. Indeed, I'm in the company of chivalrous people. How did that all happen? How did that come about?" It came about because there was some amount of *himma*, a certain high degree of trust and faith, a higher degree of effort and struggle, and not enough money to move anywhere else when you wanted to run. You needed shoes on your feet or a ticket. [And you] realize more and more that every aspect of nature is created by Allah. When we are looking and in the presence of Allah, it's not a time to be angry or vindictive or punitive or whatever kind of adjectives you want to choose that are negative. You realize that you just want to be in that company because that company has somehow managed to be safe and secure, floating above a lot of the trials and tribulations of day to day life. Every one of us who undertakes this *jihad al akbar* undertakes it with our ego fully developed. The path doesn't usually come to the people who have done all the other work, and they are ready just for the last stage: "the path." No. The path comes much earlier to us, and we have to take it with us and walk on it even in the most difficult circumstance. Sometimes it's fine, and sometime there is glass on the road. Sometimes it's a beautiful, wide boulevard, and sometimes we find ourselves in a place that only a four-wheel drive vehicle could have gone, a real bumpy place; nonetheless, Allah's protection is with us.

According to Tasawwuf and all the teachers, we have been given all the tools necessary to heal ourselves and refine ourselves. They are available to us: on demand. Only those people who affirm the goodness, the positive, the moral and ethical standards, according to their culture and society, will see the presence of Allah Swt in their lives, because Allah takes up a lot of room. If you have your room cluttered, He cannot fit in. You have to empty out. We need to reflect upon ourselves, question ourselves, and measure our day

with all sincerity, and then let things happen. Put in your effort over here; something comes out over there. Put the money in here; the Almond Joy comes out the bottom of the machine. Even a little bit of sweetness goes a long way.

None of us are going to complain about an hour drive, but we are sure to complain about a 10 hour drive. No matter how much water you bring or sandwiches you bring, you get to the destination and think, “O my God, in 5 days I have to drive back.” Isn’t that right? “What a wonderful vacation. It’s terrible we have to leave in a few days.” Already you are beating yourself up. Before we go to bed, we should reflect upon our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Maybe write a little something down. Take the time to do that. Not only will it be a cherished text for others to come, *insh’allah*, but it is a way of beginning the process of expressing the values you are trying to express. It’s a cooperative arrangement between the *nafs* and the other alternatives. We have to believe that we have the capability to overcome whatever needs to be overcome. We have to be reminded. Sometimes the reminder comes in not-nice ways. There’s a *hadith* where the Prophet Mohammed (sal) says,

***The most severe trials are experienced by the anbiyā among you.***

***Thereafter, by those who are most close to them. And thereafter, by those who are most close to those who are close to them. Taba’ain and taba-taba’ain.***

Trials come because Allah wants to shorten the distance between Himself and His ‘*abd*. It is said that Allah afflicts us with trials and tests until we are purified and become sincere. And He burns us in the fire of His love until only the ashes of the

negative things remain. If you go out and buy gold ore, [though] it might be good for the market we have today, you'd rather have the gold that has been put through the fire and melted out of the matrix: 24 karat pure gold. Not just because you don't want to mess with the other stuff to get pure gold, but because you don't have time anymore.

We have to become worthy of the presence of Allah Swt so that Allah gives us very strategic and important things to deliver. One of the things that motivates us to deliver is to understand what it means to make a commitment on this path, and become really an individual who can use all of their skills and abilities in some way to reach a destination. [It is] not sit around and feel sorry for oneself, or make excuses for oneself, but [it is to] make the effort to transform oneself back to the state of their *fitrah*, back to the point where justice is seen to be pure and love is seen to be sincere. That seems to be a task at the time we are living in, for ourselves and others. It is said that the *'arifin* are purified by these tests and trials and look forward to them. I don't know that I could be so generous. But certainly we understand that these afflictions Allah Swt puts upon us, physical ones and emotional ones, whatever they may be, really are a means, a *fath* (doorway) to be not so out of control, trying to control everything. We become out of control. Literally, we run out of the mechanism for controlling.

I think in these times we live in, we have to remember it's not just finding the blessings and love of Allah in some generic sense that is important, but that we have to earn it. As we earn it, and serve others, work hard, do our prayers, do our *muraqabah*, as we earn that mercy and grace of Allah Swt, we are doing a lot of good. No matter what world

we are reaching out through, if we are reaching out through the Internet, or to young people who come from Iraq for the summer time, or to decision-makers, it's all the same thing. It's all *fi sabīlillah*. The only ones who can connect on a higher level (that is to say, who deserve the whole pizza and not just a slice) is to remember that you are always being watched. Within you and outside of you is a greater truth we call Allah. Allah says,

***Neither the heavens and the earth can contain Me. Only the heart of My believing servant can contain Me.***

That's a big thing to contemplate. Better run home and change the sheets, because a guest is coming. The guest is sleeping in your heart, and always was in your heart. We pay very little attention to that reality. We have to start to pay very much attention to our self in a way that reaches out to others. It's my humble opinion that it comes down to people helping people. Maybe the application form from Ford Foundation wouldn't be so picky: you would qualify by just being sincere and poor. You qualify for programs that may not help you tomorrow but will help your children's children so they won't have to carry two generations' burden of debt on their heads. This is all very Sufic. It's the way we are. We have to be out there helping others. We have to be thinking of our own organizations and self only to the degree it becomes well-run, transparent, and all the things it should be as an organization so it can continue to serve. Our community too, has things to change, to revivify, and to have a collective understanding. This is what I'm reminded of when I read my email and see the reports, and hear the stories about people out on the streets, and 600,000 jobs lost. Our job remains the same. *Insh'allah*, I hope you don't mind this quasi-sociological talk tonight. We all have been given some rank, if

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not a high rank, in the army of soldiers of chivalry. Let's not forget that. It all starts at home. *Asalāmu aleikum.*