

Brunch Update

Issue 84 - July 2016

Sufi Service Committee of Boston

Addressing the most pressing needs of our community



Emily serves some scrambled eggs.

Emily Levin - Happenings

This past Sunday, the Sufi Service Committee team prepared a tasty meal for our friends at the shelter consisting of grilled chicken, sweet potato mash, salad, and watermelon for dessert. Uproarious laughter, full bellies, and lightness in the air all served as a testament to the growing friendship between volunteers and residents. To the unsuspecting eye, it appears that we are serving the residents and doing them a favor, but in reality we are being served dishes of stories, gratitude, and jokes right back.

Mike, one of the residents, told us stories about his days fishing in Nantucket, Rockport, and Martha's Vineyard. Ray, a Vietnam vet, dished out one-liners that had us in stitches of laughter. Bill, a volunteer, played riveting rendition of "Dead Egyptian Blues" on the ukulele. It was quite the wonderful occasion.

*"I'm a lab manager at an attention lab at BU. I'm starting a PhD program in cognitive science this fall at Brown. I love soccer, chess, and dancing. :)
And helping others."*

- Emily Levin



Cherries are a great pre-meal appetizer.

Please Join Us for the First Anniversary of the Sufi Service Committee Clothes Drive

Friday September 16, 2016
2:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Noor Oriental Rugs, Inc.
769 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138

Keynote address by
Cambridge Mayor Denise Simmons

As we enjoy the warmer seasons of 2016, we must not forget how the colder seasons affect the less fortunate homeless population in our neighborhood. Our aim is to provide warmer clothes to everyone in need as a new outfit may provide that boost in self-confidence needed by those struggling to improve their lives.



Cheryl, Appleton Cafe owner, donates pastries regularly.



Mo's belgian waffles make for an inspiring pre-service breakfast.

Rick Reibstein: Participating in a Sunday Sufi Service

Each Sunday, the Sufi Service Committee of Boston provides food for those who live in a transitional shelter. In addition, because winter is approaching, the committee has invited donations of clothing that is in good condition, at Noor Oriental Rugs, 769 Concord Avenue, Cambridge.

I wish to describe my experience of the Sufi Center. I am more what is usually called a secular humanist, a child of the Enlightenment, than what you would call a religious person. But I appreciate religious ideas that have to do valuing people and recognizing the gift of the miracle of life. I can enjoy a religious service, and can derive meaning from the



performance of ritual. I often try to extract underlying ideas of value even from religious assertions with which I disagree. But what the Sufi Service Committee of Boston does on Sunday requires no extractive effort. When I came to the Sufi Center, there was no chanting, no praying that I saw, or statements of dedication. No dogma was invoked. I witnessed no acts of identification or professions of loyalty to a creed or group. What I saw was not an abstraction of the idea of service. All that happened was that we had some food, some tea, and then we brought and served food to people who have a hard time affording it.

I know very little about Sufism, beyond stories of the “wise fool” the Mullah Nasruddin, and the sublime poetry of Rumi and Hafez. I was interested to see that the Sufi Service center has pictures on the wall of Javad Nurbakhsh, of the Nimatullahi order. On the wall was a chart of Masters of that order going back centuries. On the website of that order¹ is this statement:

Sufism is a school for the actualization of divine ethics. It involves an enlightened inner being, not intellectual proof; revelation and witnessing, not logic. By divine ethics, we are referring to ethics that transcend mere social convention, a way of being that is the actualization of the attributes of God.

Sunday, November 22 was a typical weekend day for the people who participate in the Sufi Service that meets every week to create the kind of exchange that the world needs. Everyone participating was helping to fill a gap that our modern society does not fill through market incentives. Everyone there was helping to make the connection that crosses the barrier created by market exchange, which places you on one side of value, and me on the other, and only when we both have dollars, can we connect.

Some today suppose that all we need, to make the world go round as it should, is for everyone to be free to participate in market exchanges. The government should restrict itself to defense and a few other functions, and the rest of us should pursue our self-interest. If we have freedom, everything will sort itself out. Freedom is a necessity of life. It is like the air: we need it to live. We are most of us glad to live in the United States, where there is relative freedom. But while freedom is a necessity, it is not sufficient for a good life. It does not by itself create what people

need, which is connection with each other. Nor does market exchange provide connection. We evolved to live in families, groups, clans, but many in the world today do not have these groups to help them get along. And now the world is so crowded that we have no choice but to learn to live with each other, all of us. It is difficult to know how to do that.

Helping others to be properly fed, and helping them to be properly clothed: these are examples of how to connect. When I asked Peter Grossi why he was there, he said that doing what is needed took him out of himself, as if being only concerned with oneself was limiting, and as if connecting with a larger community gave him a sense of freedom from confinement in being only one person. When I asked Jasmine Harris why she was there, she said that it was important not to be too concerned with material things, that they are only temporary, as if there is something that is permanent that can be grasped, in the act of connection. When I asked Peter Heller why he and his whole family were there, he said “to experience the larger community we live in.” When I asked Tim Pecoraro why he was there, he said because “it makes you feel good, being a part of something bigger than yourself.”

Connecting is not as simple as it may sound. When I sat with residents of the shelter, some would not meet my eye, or engage with me in conversation. One kept telling the others that when he says to back off, he means it, and if you don't listen, he made a gesture of cutting the throat. One laughed and said “I hear you man”. One resident named Leo was happy to talk, and I asked him if all the residents of the house were there. He said no, many would not come down to participate. I asked why not, and he said, “they have trouble accepting handouts”.

In our society it is a matter of pride for many not to accept help. But our idea that each of us should be so independent is a sad version of the meaning of freedom: being left alone means being lonely. Many modern philosophers, such as John Dewey and Isaiah Berlin, spoke of real freedom as incorporating more than simply the absence of restraints. The existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre famously stood for the freedom of humanity from beliefs in the absolute, for the idea that we are simply here, “condemned to freedom”. But he also said that even if you are born into a world without meaning, without hope, without love, “you can always make something out of what you've been made into.” In his

philosophy, freedom was not the end, but the beginning. People are what they make of themselves.

The people who participated in the Sufi Service I saw this Sunday demonstrated how it is possible to make something sublime of the time we are given to be alive on Earth. Even for those in the shelter who did not come down to receive it, they created connection because they were there. With the clothing drop, the Service creates a connection between those are willing to give, and those who need to receive. It is possible to calculate the money saved because you don't have to buy a new coat. It is possible to calculate the money saved because you don't have to pay for managing the old coat as a waste. Because some used clothing gets shipped long distance before being reused or processed or disposed, it is possible to calculate the costs of shipping. But this is the folly of modern thinking: we substitute precision for accuracy, mathematics for judgment, calculation for wisdom. The value of donating clothing that is still in good quality and can be used by those who need it has nothing to do with dollars or fuel. The value is in creating community, the most sorely needed commodity in the world.

When I asked Mo Noorae why he did what he does, he said, "Happiness comes through helping others. If you only help yourself, you will be sad. If you help others you will be happy. Sometimes I feel that every cell in my body is happy." Theresa, 19 years old, said that she was part of the Sufi community because she wanted to move beyond the rituals of religion. The Sufi Service is not just giving food to those who are hungry. It is providing the chance for community and meaning. Perhaps this is what the website of the Nimatullahi order refers to as "truth".

[1http://www.nimatullahi.org/what-is-sufism/](http://www.nimatullahi.org/what-is-sufism/)

Rick Reibstein teaches environmental law and policy at Boston University and Harvard Extension and Summer Schools. He offers consultation on environmental policy and the strategy of preventing pollution before it happens, in particular reducing the use of toxic materials. See the case study he wrote on Noor Oriental Rugs, when he was working for the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, which he did for 27 years: <http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/eea/ota/case-studies/noor-study-oct27-14.pdf>. He also writes poetry for the pleasure of doing it, and articles on sustainability because we need to be thinking about how to do it.



Red and green peppers stuffed to the brim.



Volunteers breakfast - eggs, hash browns, tomatoes, and roasted red peppers.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED



Lucky, Emily, Stephen, Lorraine, Sherif, and Peter at brunch.

Volunteers of all background are welcome to get involved by:

- Preparing and serving meals
- Donating and organizing clothes
- Providing administrative assistance
- Making financial contributions

Contact:

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