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AI Statement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

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A Bewildered Dervish Stokes the Fire and Balances on a Single Hair: A Heuristic Inquiry by a Trainee Humanistic Psychotherapist

Introduction

Building upon the foundational work of Rogers, Buber and Gendlin, Moustakas (1990) developed the heuristic research method. The method defines a hermeneutic process which facilitates inner inquiry, accessing tacit personal knowledge through intuition and indwelling (Polanyi, 1966). It is a research process which complements humanistic psychotherapy and the inherent reflective and reflexive processes therein and rests upon the assumption is that inner inquiry has both personal and universal significance.

The heuristic research presented here took place over a period of four weeks during the latter part of the second year of a Masters program in humanistic psychotherapeutic practice. It explores issues that arose at a moment in the relationship between my spiritual

path and my training as a therapist. “The moment” was being asked to undertake this heuristic research, which provoked a some strong imagery. This became my starting point from which to enter into the six phases of the heuristic process as outlined by Moustakas (1990, pp.27-32): initial engagement; immersion; incubation; illumination; explication and creative synthesis. The initial engagement phase distilled and defined the question for the focus of inquiry:

“What is the relevance of the imagery, invoked by my initial response to this heuristic assignment, to my spirituality and practice as a trainee therapist?”

Methodology

Heuristic inquiry requires space and time for reflection, meditation and process, and the inner searching can uncover difficult, emotive material. Currently seeing clients on placement as a volunteer counsellor, I am bound by an ethical code of conduct to take responsibility for self-care and wellbeing (BACP, 2018, p.27). I enlisted the support and understanding of close family. I informed my counselling placement supervisor and asked not to be assigned any new clients until I had completed this heuristic process. I also have therapy as part of the requirements for the MA program. The therapeutic relationship became a source of support and also an exploratory space intertwined with the heuristic process. I am not currently working, but have family commitments, so much of the conscious, reflective process and the writing of this manuscript took place at home, during school hours, and at times when my energy levels were good. Throughout, I made sure to exercise, eat, hydrate and rest well.

During initial engagement, the researcher encounters significant relationships within their autobiography and social context. A question, problem, or theme emerges through intuition and tacit awareness which is of core, personal significance. During immersion, the researcher “lives” within the question - alert to meanings from all dimensions including dreams, social situations, inner reflection and dialogue. Inner and outer life experiences all become possible sources of meaning centred around the question. The researcher at some point steps away from this intense focus for a period of incubation and the seed that has been planted is silently and creatively nourished. Illumination occurs spontaneously when the researcher has stopped striving and is open to receiving new awareness, intuitions, and tacit workings that reveal meaning and essence. The process of explication is to examine, understand and articulate or express what has been revealed to consciousness. Once the researcher is familiar with the meanings and what the experience has revealed, the whole experience addresses the question that arose during initial engagement. This is brought together in creative synthesis.

Moustakas (1990) proposes a literature review as part of the final research manuscript. However, the nature of this particular heuristic inquiry did not lend itself to this. Literature was discovered within processes of immersion and intertwined with all the other phases and is presented as such, and was often selected according to the felt sense (Gendlin, 2003). Similarly, the stages of inquiry proved non-linear. Indeed, the inner life of dreams and symbols is considered in Jungian psychology as beyond linear time. (Youvan, 2024). This timelessness is mirrored in the slippage between present and past tenses and the structure of this essay which is threaded through with metaphor, imagery and poetry. The selected poetry from Sufi-mystic Attar’s (2005) *Conference of the Birds*¹ “deals with time and space beyond a traditional temporal setting” (Afreen et al, 2023). All six phases

¹ *The Conference of the Birds* is a poem by Sufi mystic Farid Ud-Din Attar (c.1145-c.1221) which describes the Sufi spiritual journey to Union with God.

of inquiry were experienced subjectively as inseparable, simultaneous and circular, or spiral, with one or all illuminating, incubating and explicating the others. While a starting point can be found, subjectively it is difficult to say which came first, or whether the whole was known at the outset.

During the initial engagement phase, I entered into the imagery of my initial response - the heuristic assignment presenting as branch hanging over a fast flowing river - and encountered significant narratives within my autobiography. I found myself immersed within personal narratives as they exist both historically and within the present moment, finding new expression within the felt sense and imagery that arose. While themes did emerge, a lyrical, narrative process, enriched by literature and conversations with my therapist and others, organically gathered momentum and took precedence over thematic analysis. This narrative process is presented as data. The creative synthesis is presented as a poem, image and piece of music and the question for the focus of inquiry and its broader significance is revisited and contextualised in the discussion section.

Lyrical Narrative Process and Discovery as Data

Brought up by my transpersonal psychotherapist mother, my childhood world of dreams and symbols were manifest and tangible. In adulthood I pursued academia but became consumed with a longing to return “home” to God. A Sufi Master found me.

"The time has come to turn your heart into a temple of fire. Your essence is gold hidden in dust. To reveal its splendor you need to burn in the fire of love."

Rumi

(Mafi & Kolin, 1999, p.113)

I turned away from everything I had ever known. I became Majnoon to his Layla², Rumi to his Shams.

*"[A] moth flew out -- his dizzy flight
Turned to an ardent wooing of the light;
He dipped and soared, and in his frenzied trance
Both self and fire were mingled by his dance --
The flame engulfed his wing-tips, body, head,
His being glowed a fierce translucent red;
And when the mentor saw that sudden blaze,
The moth's form lost within the glowing rays,
He said: "He knows, he knows the truth we seek,
That hidden truth of which we cannot speak.
To go beyond all knowledge is to find
That comprehension which eludes the mind..."*

(Attar, 2005)

² Majoon and Layla is a Persian, allegorical love story that symbolises the intensity of spiritual love. Majoon means "crazy one" and represents the penultimate stage on the spiritual path of the disciple.



(Image: Mueller, 2018)

Heart on fire, I became a lover of the Beloved (the Sufi name for God). I burned until the longing became the longed-for.

*“A Sufi's heart is a lamp of fire burning
in god's love.”*

(Uddin, 2025)

After the Union, the Sufi Master, who has been a guide, is no longer needed. Something happens, or the teacher does something which repels the disciple and the umbilical cord is cut. There is a devastation that comes from being set free, yet returned to themselves. The disciple can feel totally lost, abandoned by the world, by the teacher, and by Beloved.

*Who are you complaining to?
I asked the reed,
Why do you moan and grieve?
“Since they’ve cut me from the river bed,
what else is left for me
but to weep?”*

Rumi

(Mafi & Kolin, 1999, p.45)

I felt the breath of Hu (the intimate name for Beloved) whipped into a whirlwind. A single drop, spat out of the Ocean, I found my battered body, soul and mind washed up on the shore, wrecked as limp bladderwrack, ingrained with desert sand and stuck with sea salt. These were all the ragged clothes I had with which to live in the world. Reason stirred - a long-tranquillised guard dog. Roused and amplified by a barking world, it said, “You’ve been in a cult!”.

I fashioned reason like a sword, with bare hands, from iron, fresh out of the molten heart of the blacksmith’s forge. I learned that there were now more than four TV channels. I saw there was Trump. I learned about cult dynamics: thought reform (Lifton ,2012; 2019; 2020); traumatising narcissists (Shaw, 2014); trauma bonds (Stein, 2021), and the concept of a cult pseudo-personality that develops and controls the real identity (Jenkinson 2016; 2019). The organisation I had been in scored 8/8 on Lifton’s eight criteria for thought reform (Lifton, 2012) and my Sufi Master’s personality seemed perfectly aligned with that of a traumatising-narcissistic cult leader (Stein, 2021). How swiftly the iron sword cooled and alchemised into hardened, sharpened steel. Within just a few weeks, swept along by

a world full of indignant, barking heads, I found myself in the position of key witness in criminal proceedings against my Sufi Master.

It was I that reported him. A personal message: I see you; don't pursue me. Aware, even beforehand, that there would be no legal conviction due to lack of legal recognition of cults and undue influence. Shunned and vilified, knowing that the remaining cult members would lie to protect their Master. At the end of an arduous process of giving evidence, I was asked to explain how, as part of initiation, we had been given spiritual names which had meanings - the vibration of which would define our individual spiritual paths. Asked my initiate name and its meaning, a silence fell across the room and deep within as I replied, "Shahideh: The Witness".

The one who cuts off your head is your friend.

The one who puts it back is your deceiver.

The one who weighs you with his troubles is your burden.

But the one who truly loves you sets you free.

Rumi

(Mafi & Kolin, 1999, p.36)

The Path has gone. The Way is lost! Practices abandoned. Sick feelings of violation below the diaphragm. An impossible task for my mind to reconcile "cult experience" with the truth of the fire of Love within my heart. I oscillated between the Ocean and the Desert, trying to keep the flame in the heart alive, helplessly watching it flicker and dim - once a raging furnace, now a tea light, waxed low with stub of blackened wick and dot of flame.

The fire of Love warms the world.

But even fire dies

In the company of ashes.

Rumi

(Mafi & Kolin, 1999, p.83)

This MA. Outwardly, the notion of working with cult survivors. Inwardly, with heart's desire to kindle the fire - a presence within. Academic assignments, chained to the reasoning mind, feel arduous, as if swimming out of the ocean against a fast current of river water. A string of distinctions, dispersed like fish eggs into the river mouth only to be washed out to sea. I am not salmon. Bladderwrack cannot swim. I do not know what form to take. Then, this heuristic assignment, like a branch hanging over the river estuary, presents itself as if a lifeline for which I have to swim against the current. I have no desire to be saved.

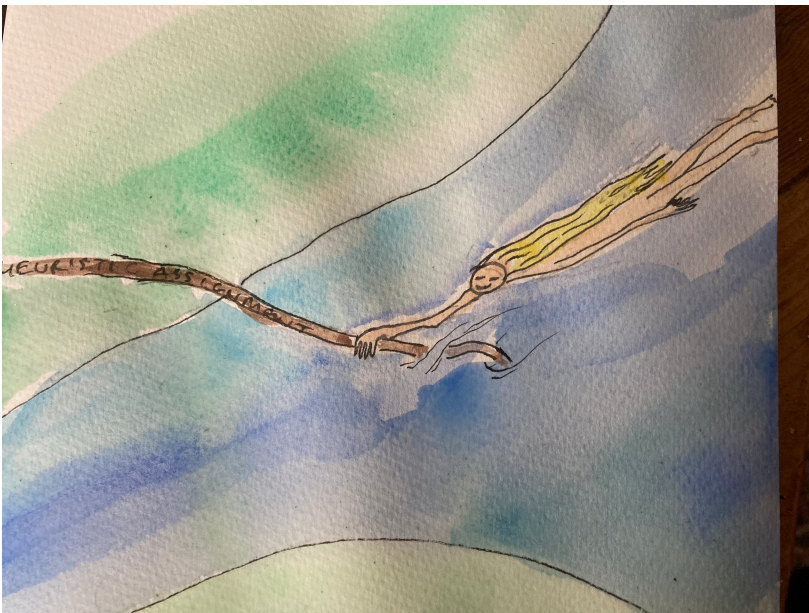


Image: *The River and the
Heuristic Branch*
(Journal Entry)

"Love is the water of life.

And a lover is a soul of fire.

The universe turns differently when fire loves water."

Shams-e-Tabriz

(Manifest, 2017)

I enter the image of *The River and Heuristic Branch* and experience a felt sense of energy coursing through my body. A river of energy within. I climb the branch. I am not wet from the ocean - this is the ocean of Beloved. The branch breaks up and is swept away. As it disappears, it calls out, "You put me here, just long enough to climb out of the water!" I am in a different, living, breathing scene.

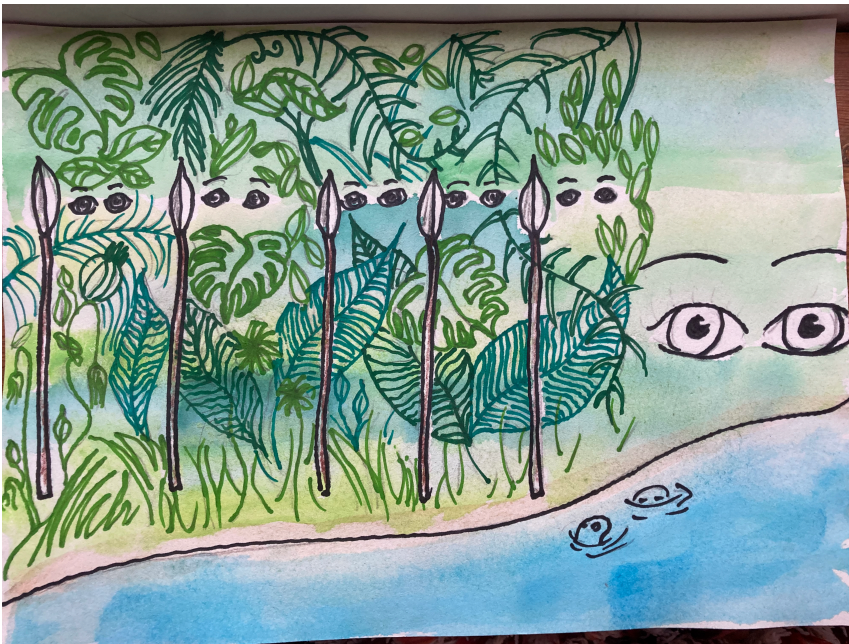


Image: *Thin as a Hair*

(Journal Entry)

I stand on silt, looking into the jungle, feeling the grit of fertile earth and creatures in the mud. I see beavers, released into the wild, just as I am! They change the environment and slow the flow, preventing flooding and overwhelm, gently dispersing water all over the land. A need for nature connection - ecology and grounded, embodied spirituality. I make to explore the jungle but I see five black men standing with spears. In them, I perceive a deep connection to the land and to ancestry, as I feel a deeper, primordial ancestry in the creatures below my feet. The ocean behind me, I see with the eyes of my Beloved. I want to dance and play, immerse with them, to joyfully explore this jungle! I become conscious of the deep blackness of their skin and my whiter skin. Their eyes look back at me, not understanding what they are seeing. Their spears are ready, waiting. I am strange to them - enemy or friend? I need to learn their language, their ways. I come with Love and playfulness, yet meet a land of tribes, a world defined by outward perception.

Eyes bewildered, stillness descends. Layers of meaning emerge as I dialogue with each element in this scene. According to my inner or outer gaze, there is both an external and an internal meaning, where all these elements are within me. The jungle - symbolic of unexplored psyche (Stambaugh et al, 2021). Traces of cultic, black and white, "them and us" thinking (Lifton, 2012). Experiences of alienation, prejudice, marginalisation and silencing as an English person living in rural Wales - a dangerous taboo! My feet sink inexorably in the sticky mud of bi-directional Othering and cultural burden. A cult survivor, wary of and "othered" by a world with limited understanding. Wariness of sharing - even this assignment.

I experience a recurring dream I have had since leaving the cult and abandoning my Sufi practices. I am lost in strange streets and towns. The more I search for the home where I used to live, the more lost I get. The streets become strange and distorted. I cannot operate my phone and I forget who I have known, and places I have known. When I give up despair, I am perfectly still, in a vast, green field . I am male, dressed as a dervish, carrying a book of Sufi poetry and the “wine” of meditation. The green is the Heart of Hearts³, the wandering dervish my state.

I dig out a bag of Sufi poetry and music, buried away five years ago. I re-engage with old practices. Finding no cultic poison or violation in my felt sense, I joyfully immerse, then lose myself in dancing, whirling, zikr (chanting), Sufi music and prayer. The fire in the heart ignites and roars! The Sufi Way is mine! I am the Way! Lost in the night, drunk on the wine from Beloved, something drops into awareness, into form. A distant aunt M that I have not seen for forty-six years. I remember her vividly, joyfully laughing, and she is laughing, joyful and dancing with me now. It feels timeless, as though the moments we shared when I was a child are happening now. The next morning, I receive a text from another aunt, telling me that M had passed away that night. I realise that I had whirled and danced on a Thursday night - when Sufis all over the world traditionally come together for khanegeh, part of which includes remembrance of those who have passed away. Deep Heart connection.

“There is a way from your heart to mine,

And my heart knows it.”

Rumi

(Mafi & Kolin, 1999, p.41)

³ Sufi’s penetrate layers of the spiritual heart. The Heart of Hearts is a centre which connects to the Divine and through that, can connect to other hearts when they are ripe. (Vaughan-Lee, 2015)

In daily life, the fire in my heart sometimes ignites the hearts of others around me.

Centering in the heart brings a grounded presence, attunement and depth of intuition with clients, others around me, and a surging with undercurrents. Life is play, catching waves or tumbling in them.

Back to “*Thin as a Hair*”. Do these men signify the five senses? It doesn’t quite fit the felt sense. In Buddhism, the jungle is a metaphor for complexity - the challenge of explaining spiritual experience in intellectual terms. (Hiemestra, 2025). That fits. Express the spiritual Heart in words... so simple, yet it can’t be done. Will I be [academically] killed like the Sufi mystic Hallaj ⁴ for ecstatically shouting “I am God!” in the marketplace?
(Massignon, 2021)

*“Although I may try to describe Love
when I experience it I am speechless.
Although I may try to write about Love
I am rendered helpless;
my pen breaks and the paper slips away
at the ineffable place
where Lover, Loving and Loved are one.”*

Rumi

(All Poetry, 2025)

⁴ Mansur Al-Hallaj (c.858-922) was a Persian mystic who was executed for claiming to be God or the Truth.

Sufi symbolism emerges. The spears represent the reasoning. Metal tips hunt, defend, attack, and discern. The wood represents the nafs (ego and personal and cultural conditioning). All are necessary in the world. The five men represent the five pillars of Islam. These are necessary when starting on the spiritual path, but become wooden nafs to burn when there is a shift in consciousness. All fuel for the fire of Love. The men are rooted in the natural world - a connection with land and ancestry. Spirituality means nothing if it is not practical and grounded.

But the eyes are full of bewilderment. The five sets of eyes are bewildered by reasoning.

*Those who are unaware are bewildered by our love game,
I am as I seem, and they think they understand.*

(Hafez, nd)

The large eyes are bewildered from knowing Beloved, and at the same time knowing that Beloved is unknowable with the mind. It is not confusion - there is clarity of vision. I see bewilderment from these different sources reflected between and back.

*“Men cannot understand the Sufi’s state,
That deep bewilderment that is their fate...
...Complaints become a grateful eulogy
And blasphemy is faith, faith blasphemy.”*

(Attar, 2005, p.202)

I become aware of a thin, black line, as thin as a hair - a threshold. In Sufism, the Hal (ecstasy in a moment of Union) is described as being lost in a curl of the black hair of Beloved. I see the path of the dervish - not-knowing, walking, balancing on that hair, becoming that hair. The threshold between the seen and unseen, being and nothing, manifest and un-manifest, intimate with the One who is also the Many.

Creative Synthesis

He is a cult leader

He is a Sufi Mystic

Both are true.

I am bewildered

I am certain in my Heart

Both are true.

I know nothing.

I hold a precious secret.

Both are true.



Image: *The Curl*. (Journal Entry)



The whirling music:

Click on image to play.

Man Che Danam? (What do

I know?)

(Nazeri, 2009)

Discussion

Sufism evades definition and, while the etiology and roots of Sufism are contested it is commonly perceived as the mystical branch of Islam (Ridgeon, 2020). These debates are beyond the scope of this assignment. However, it is important to state that Sufi mystics do not conform rigidly to any particular religion and mystics are found within all religious traditions. Sufism has been historically perceived as a threat to Islam but in recent times is increasingly turned to as a “medicine for modernisation with all its adverse effects” (Umam, 2019) and as a healing, psychotherapeutic tool utilising a state where the heart is “awake” (Mitha, 2019; Irham, 2023; Al-Halim & Mohammed, 2024; Sholika, 2024) and certain practices such as zikr (Sukipto, 2020; Afiani & Haririe, 2024). Some draw parallels between *muraqaba* (a heart-state of union with God) and mindfulness practices (Isgandarova, 2019) with some promoting this as a way to overcome addictions (Kamila et al, 2024). There is recognition of the intersection between Sufism and psychotherapy and its potential application in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary faith contexts (Al-Owidha, 2024).

In Sufism, poetry is praxis (Umashankar, 2022). Integral to my process and threaded throughout this assignment, it simultaneously reaches toward the heart of the reader. Similarly, dreams, imagery, waking dreams, music and trance states are represented as process and invite the reader to immerse. The ancient Sufi mystic Al-Arabi asserts that most men are asleep and dreaming is akin to a dream within a dream. However, he distinguishes between ordinary dreams and spiritual dreams and waking dream-states, stating that one can know God or the nature of reality through these (Moris, 2021) . In the Sufi Way we follow these dreams, manifesting them in reality (Vaughan-Lee, 2012). This inquiry allowed me to access waking-dream states through the Sufi practices to which I am

attuned, but which I had distanced myself from for a number of years in order to separate from cultic influence.

Reclaiming Sufi practices has been healing and allows me to sustain the spiritual fire in my heart. This is the core quality that contributes to my experience of presence as a therapist. Deeply intimate, it has a definite, embodied, felt sense and it emanates an energy that can vibrate other people's hearts. Cult survivors speak of "spiritual rape" (Miller, 2024). This feeling is true concerning the appropriation of my own spiritual experience. My reclamation of Sufism is comparable to a person reclaiming and rediscovering sexuality and sensuality after experiencing sexual violence.

Literature on therapeutic approaches to working with cult survivors is limited and largely serves to help the therapist/survivor understand and deconstruct cultic influence and reconstruct a sense of individual self. (Jenkinson, 2019; Shaw, 2023) Subjective experiences are framed in terms of dissociation created by hypnotism and mind control. (Jenkinson, 2019; Shaw, 2023) However, this entrenches a "doer - done to" dynamic and gives an unsettling feeling of throwing the spiritual baby out with the bathwater. Alongside cultic abuse, many survivors experience profound spiritual journeys and most survivor accounts contain this sense of lack of reconciliation - where spiritual experiences cannot be explained or deconstructed. (Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Glasscock, 2019).

This ambivalence is conveyed in the documentary series *Wild, Wild Country* (Way & Way, 2018). The viewer pendulates between identification with the devoted cult-member experience with controversial Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and the opposing perspectives of those who left the cult, those within the outside community and investigating and prosecuting teams. My heuristic journey addresses the dichotomous

experience and values the authenticity of my spiritual journey alongside the cult experience and its deconstruction. I am grateful for *all* of the experiences. Indeed, they are inseparably intertwined. I have been both whistleblowing apostate and true believer! By asserting my experience of the cult leader and Sufi mystic as being simultaneously true, my heuristic inquiry challenges narratives and assumptions concerning the personality of cult leaders. Their cluster-B personality traits (Henderson, 2023) or traumatising narcissism is explained as rooted in childhood attachment wounds (Shaw, 2024). One of the psychotherapeutic tasks of the cult survivor is to unmask them and expose them as a fraud (Jenkinson, 2016; 2019; Shaw, 2023). This heuristic inquiry raises questions around this - perhaps the guru or mystic distorts over time, corrupted by absolute power, or perhaps they manifest an element of the human condition whereby the greater the spiritual light, the longer the potential egotistic shadow.

These issues are significant in my personal journey and will also impact my future work as a therapist - I hope to work with cult survivors. This could also contribute to the emergent field as awareness of cults and religious trauma continues to increase. As a therapist working with a wider population, the ability to embrace the shadow with the light and to feel comfortable with uncertainty and not-knowing (Proctor et al, 2021), are core qualities which expand possibilities, use of self and a deep acceptance of the client within the therapeutic relationship.

While the spiritual dimension is embraced in humanistic and transpersonal psychotherapy, it is often vaguely described and without reference to a common, felt sense. For example, Self energy is a core concept in IFS therapy and is described in terms of attributes such as compassion and curiosity (Earley, 2022). Broadly, the spiritual dimension is represented as something distant to glimpse, aspire to, or be inspired or changed by, but which

remains a transient or unattainable state, often relegated to moments of meeting (Pye, 2021). The quality of assertion around spiritual presence is meek and tentative, bordering on false humility. Further, mysticism in psychotherapy is surrounded by taboos (Nes, 2021). Academics scramble to objectively define what a mystic is or create scales to measure mystical experiences. For example, Qadir and Tiaynen-Qadir 's (2024) attempt to scale and demystify mysticism through the lens of critical realism. No one dares to stand in the market place and shout, "I am God!". This heuristic assignment challenges those taboos and claims that it is easy to know God, intimately and mystics are everywhere.

The world is full of men like Jesus...

Rumi

(Mafi & Kolin, 1999, p.115)

The fire in the heart is an energy with a clearly-definable felt sense, common to Sufi's around the world. It can be traced throughout the ancient Sufi poetry of Rumi, Hafez, Attar, and others, and the academic literature presented in this assignment. Tweedy (1995) describes in detail her spiritual journey and lighting of the fire in her heart. Lewellyn Vaughan-Lee (2015) describes the energy of fire within the Heart of Hearts and Prendergast (2020) sets out mindfulness practices designed to ignite this presence and unparalleled depth of relational intuition. Current debates concerning what makes an effective therapist could be expanded through research that considers the therapist's mystical, heart presence.

Conclusion

I can now address the heuristic question. My response to the heuristic inquiry opened a portal to healing through imagery. Deeper immersion allowed an organic re-connection to

my Sufi practices which are core to sustaining my understanding and experience of therapeutic heart-presence. Further, this heuristic inquiry contributes to the field of cult awareness and therapeutic approaches to working with cult survivors. By addressing the dichotomy between cult experience and spiritual experience, it challenges narratives around cults and the personality of the cult leader. It also challenges taboos around mysticism in psychotherapy and proposes heart presence as a definable, felt sense, and proposes several potential areas for future research.

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