

Enduring Courage and Wisdom: A Tribute to Laleh Bakhtiar

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

In late September, I reached out to Laleh to see how she was doing given the ongoing global pandemic and social unrest in our midst, as I had not received news from her for some weeks. She warmly responded, informing me in a hopeful tone that she had been diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndromes (*MDS*), a rare blood disorder, and that she was in the second month of what she hoped would be a six-month recovery process. I remember the moment I read this electronic correspondence, having paused with a heavy heart to think, reflect, and to pray for her swift recovery. I responded right away. Little did I know that in a month's time, on Sunday, October 18, 2020, she would pass away, or rather make her return to the Divine, in Chicago, Illinois at the age of 82.

Laleh was always engrossed in a project or written work. Whether it was a new book, a translation or editing of a text, or the preparation of an article, she was tireless. This is evidenced by the fact that she authored, translated, edited, and adapted over 150 books, including *The Sense of Unity* (1973) with Nader Ardalan and *Sufi Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (1976)—not to mention one of her prodigious accomplishments in 2007, a translation of the Quran entitled—*The Sublime Quran*. I remember our many conversations, speaking together and listening to how animated and involved she was in the work that she was conducting as the founder and president of the Institute of Traditional Psychology and Scholar-in-Residence at Kazi Publications.

One of our shared areas of interest is the revival of the original understanding of psychology or the ‘science of the soul’ according to the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of the world, what has been termed ‘perennial psychology.’ Her pioneering work on Sufi psychology focusing on the traditional and transpersonal dimension of the Enneagram is what first drew me to her writings. She emphasized that any integral psychology required Spirit/Intellect, soul, and body, known in Islam as *Rūh/Aql*, *nafs* and *jism*. This sacred science of the human psyche integrates all degrees and modes of Reality: ‘*We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves, until it be manifest unto them that it is the truth.*’ (41:53) Her most recent book, *Quranic Psychology of the Self: A Textbook on Islamic Moral Psychology* (2019), appears to be the culmination and realization of over three decades of diligent effort to articulate what Islamic psychology is and how to apply it in a therapeutic context.

I remember well the time we spent together at the second Sacred Web Conference held in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2014. We discussed metaphysics, spirituality, and its connection to psychology as we strolled through the colorful downtown streets of Vancouver. She had a childlike quality and was very personable and pleasant to be with. During the occasion of the conference, I conducted an interview with Laleh,¹ which was memorable as the conference room that we were using for the interview was adjacent to a large wedding celebration. I vividly recall the challenges that we faced given the overbearing music and the voices from the other room, yet Laleh maintained a calm and humorous demeanor and continued with her focused responses as though we were in the ambiance of an alternate reality. It was a special and memorable moment that we were able to share together at the conference, which I am grateful for.

There is much more that could be said about Laleh, as I always found her to be kind, considerate, supportive, and energetic about life and all things sacred, especially the spiritual path. She often spoke of her indebtedness to and praise of the guidance that she received from her mentor, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the most important scholars of Islam and comparative religion in the world today.

¹ See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, ‘Finding Our Sacred Center in the Modern World: Interview with Laleh Bakhtiar,’ *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 34 (Winter 2014), pp. 157-170.

It is a great privilege and honor that Laleh regarded me as a 'good friend' and a fellow traveler on the spiritual path. While she considered me as a colleague, she was very much a mentor to me, and I am indebted to her as she helped pave the way for me to conduct much of my own work on the intersection of psychology and spirituality. Her passing is a great loss to countless people around the world as she was a tireless and dedicated servant of Truth, upholding both the Islamic tradition and its mystical dimension, Sufism. She always signed her correspondence with the English word 'peace' rather than its Arabic *salām*. It stood out to me and caused me to pause and probe deeper into its meaning. It is my prayer that she is resting in God's Peace. I conclude with what is perhaps the most common epitaph in the Islamic world: '*Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return*' (2:156).