



Spreading the message needs the fuel of friendship

Interview of Murshida Nuria Sabato (S) and Murshid Nawab Pasnak (P)
the new leaders of the International Sufi Movement
by Martin van der Graaff and Irene Lennings

Taking advantage of the fact that Murshida Nuria Sabato (S) and Murshid Nawab Pasnak (P) were together at the summer school, the Soefi Gedachte, the quarterly of the Dutch Soefi Beweging, invited them for a double interview. Nuria and Nawab, since last year the new leaders of the International Sufi Movement, received us gracefully in the cherags' room of the temple, with a big photograph of Hazrat Inayat Khan smiling down benevolently on the four of us.

Q: Can you tell us how you started your cooperation and how you shape your leadership together?

S: It is nice to mention that we did not start from scratch. In fact, a few years ago we shared a dinner together in Hotel Noordzee, and we both sensed that feeling of kinship and we suspected we would be working closely together in the future. As it happened, I was nominated as Joint-General Representative¹ earlier than Nawab, and even before my nomination was voted on in the executive committee, Nawab enthusiastically skyped me, offering his full support. From that point on, we established a frequent communication. So when Nawab was nominated, the transition was seamless. We made a list of things to give consideration to, discussed amongst ourselves which items had priority and then shared out the work. When a letter of correspondence from the office is needed one of us offers to write a draft of, depending on who is best suited to do the groundwork, and then sends the draft to the other for comments and suggestions. And finally we put both our names to the end result. And this shared activity and the feeling we are moving in the same direction makes me feel comfortable and relaxed.

P: Of course it is a blessing that we are able to find harmony between each other – but we also work hard at making it work. And that is a necessity. The last few years it have been very difficult for the Sufi Movement. We have to be honest: a lot of disharmony and dispute and regrettable things have been written down and circulated widely. Neither one of us could bear to go back to that situation. We will do anything we can to create harmonious relations between us and as many others as we can. And we should set an example there. Whether people actually see us collaborating or not: it is felt by the way we approach topics and mureeds.

P: In my opinion, it is very healthy for the Sufi Movement that we have a woman in the senior leadership. It makes for the necessary variety in the way challenges and developments are approached.

S: And I want to add that working with Nawab gives me the feeling I am finally having a brother, which I do not have in real life! Of course, we are very different, I'm quick and tend to speak my mind easily, Nawab is more pensive and methodical. We do not view everything from the same angle, but in the end we always find a way forward. We balance each other perfectly.

¹ It was decided in 2015 that both Karimbaskh Witteveen and Murshid Hidayat, when they would step down as Co-General Representative, would nominate their own successor, subject to acceptance by the Executive committee. Nuria Sabato was appointed in March 2016 and Nawab Pasnak in August 2016. As Joint General Representatives they lead the Movement, together with the Executive Committee, and assisted by an advisory council and leaders of special activities.



P: It's nice being a brother to Nuria, but brotherhood and sisterhood, as we call it in the movement, is not everything. I did have a brother, and brothers can sometimes fight, especially when they're young. Given the choice, I would, I think, prefer friendship, and it is that spirit of genuine friendship that I would like to promote.



Q: Which brings us to your first priorities?

P: Our first priority now is "to steady the boat"

S: And help people feel safe again.

P: And moreover, to rebuild the crew. We must keep in mind that many people, primarily from the Netherlands branch of the Movement, have spent 25 years or more in responsible positions. That was not so strange as Holland was the largest community, but it was also a considerable burden. Now they have stepped down or are no longer with us. We are very glad we have been able to redistribute their responsibilities to talented successors from other countries and continents. For



example, Amin Betancur from Colombia is now Executive Supervisor, Inam Rodrigo Ando from Ecuador is now Acting General Secretary, Shakti Genn from Australia is now leader of the Spiritual Healing.

P: And with this new crew we want to collaborate closely and to encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and friendship. Basically, we want a culture that you can also see in “not for profit” organisations. These are fuelled by the ideal and not so much by rules and structures. You do need them, but that will not be sufficient if the fuel of friendship is not there.

S: We complement all this by a conscious effort to get input from as many people as possible. That was the main idea behind the Google groups that we created. We have asked Rani McLaughlin, the national representative of the US, who leads the national representatives Google Group, to convey the idea that it is they, in fact, who are the boss of the executive committee. They know what happens on the ground. This approach is our idea of collaborative leadership. If you want to lead, you must invite participation and not tell what to do. So we organised a flow of ideas that can be further shaped and moulded. Without that input, we would be working in a vacuum. And when mureeds see that ideas are taken seriously, it helps in building trust.

Q: it is a challenge to find out what mureeds need most. Can you say something about the difference between the mureeds of old and the mureeds of today?

S: Time! The most problematic difference is the amount of time that mureeds have. Summer schools originally lasted a whole summer, three months. Among the early mureeds were many aristocrats, they could afford to invest that much time. Now most of us are working class people. Somehow we must create space and openness, in order to give them, in a short period of time, an experience that they can take back to work.

S: Another difference is that modern people tend not to be thorough, they take a nibble at things, then try something else. I myself once was told: you Americans are so over-enthusiastic, you go for everything that is new! So our challenge is to teach mureeds some form of elasticity: the ability to more easily change over from work to meditation and vice versa.

P: In the early days of the Movement, religious feeling was still prevalent. People said to themselves: “This is a nice religion”, even though Universal Sufism is not in fact a religion. But the world is not really religious anymore and has become much more individualistic. And in a way that individualism makes it very difficult sometimes to let go of your ego. So old problems have been replaced by new ones. But I must add that our work is not to find new mureeds. Our work is to spread the Message. And if the ideal of unity of religious ideals penetrates in society, we do not need to be known as an organisation. If people do not give the Sufis credit, so much the better. If we're not in the public eye, we do not attract opposition either!

Q: Does the Movement, compared to other branches of the Sufi family, have some characteristics that you would like to preserve?

S: Every organisation has its own flavour. Some people like the scent of a rose, others like jasmine or amber. Originally, I first got to know the Sufi Order, who have endearing esoteric and even ethereal qualities, although I have to add that Pir Vilayat was very much interested in science and mathematics. And I got to know the Ruhaniat, who are very good at creating a community. They were not focussing so much on the inner school. But the insight of Ruhaniat founder Samuel Lewis was extremely important. He tried to give kids other highs than drugs. It was too difficult for them to meditate, and so he arrived at the inspired idea to make them meditate in movement, in dance.



S: But I must say that getting to know Murshid Hidayat was the greatest blessing of my life. I felt I was at the headwaters of the Ganges and drinking the pure Message. I thought: this what I've been looking for, this is home! Up to then, I was always reading the Message, but looking more or less through a veil. Hidayat helped in lifting that veil. He gave me the feeling that the Movement is the least number of steps away from how it began, with the least amount of re-interpretation. Although that does not mean we are better. Also, Hidayat told us many things well worth knowing about the way Inayat Khan got on with his children. It felt like a privilege to listen to Hidayat's stories about how they were taught as children. From photographs we infer that Inayat Khan was a very serious person, but in fact there was a lot of laughter in the household.

P: I myself also got to know and appreciate the Order and the Ruhaniat before meeting Murshid Hidayat. And indeed it is a good thing that each Sufi organisation has its own personality, a way of expressing the message. And we accept that methods and structures do not satisfy everybody. Not even the United Nations can do that!

P: But liking the Movement, for comparable reasons as Nuria, also presents me with a dilemma. Yes, we have to guard the heritage, but we also need room to grow and adapt. We must find a middle road between those who say "How dare you change that comma" and those who may propose to include the telephone directory in the holy scriptures on the altar on the grounds that is a very useful book. It takes delicacy, diplomacy and artistry to connect those poles.

Q: When eventually you will hand over your responsibilities to new Joint-General representatives, how would you like to be remembered?

S: There is only one thing worth being remembered for: love

P: My aim is not to be remembered at all. Besides, there are so many ways to view the past. There is a saying: history is a story about what didn't happen, written by people who weren't there. But if I may mention just one mundane thing: we are not a very orderly or efficient organisation. It's nobody's fault, but it would help spreading the message if we can organise ourselves in a more steady rhythmic way.

Q: if you would meet with our Murshid on the terrace as you leave here, and he would ask: how is our organisation getting along, what would you say?

P: I am not sure if this is a question that Murshid would ask. He was not very organisation-minded. But I would say that our work for spreading the message (and that was his main concern) is moving forward well and I think Murshid is smiling at what we are doing and happy with the way things are starting to move..

S: It is interesting to imagine about being in contact with Murshid. It does not happen to me literally of course, but sometimes when I have a question for him a goldfinch comes round (we do have them in Missouri) and that feels like a confirmation. And I may seem a bit out with the dark hair, brown skin and the pink lipstick, being very energetic in my speech and very animated. Before speaking up on important issues I want to wait until I can feel Murshid's presence or even his hand on my shoulder. And then I know: now it is okay to speak.

Q: Is there something else that you would like to convey to our readers?

S: I am a religious person. Many people have that natural curiosity in other religions, and I am no exception. I was educated by nuns, lived in a Tibetan monastery, spent time with the Carmelite nuns, I stayed in Konya (Turkey) for a long time. My first marriage was to man from the middle east, a Palestinian, and I lived there with the family. I've gone really deeply into those religions, but yet



Sufism is always coming home, because it is like the light. I want to illustrate with a quote by Inayat Khan.

“Sufism is only a light thrown upon your own religion, like a light brought into a room, and which reveals that the room contains everything you want. The one thing you needed was light.”

P: It is human nature that the closer we get to people the greater the risk of being critical of one another. We need to work on the opposite, to be as tolerant as possible to each other. It would be so nice if we could be open to each other. If we understand each other it is not so hard to build something.

This concludes our interview. We wish Nawab and Nuria all the inspiration that Murshid has so generously left us. We are sure that with the help of so many devoted mureeds they will spread the message, enlighten the path of many and together will radiate real spiritual friendship.