



## **JAMES MORRIS, Ph.D.**

### **HARVARD Ph.D., AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR AND POET**

James Morris (BA Chicago; Ph.D. Harvard), recently retired from Boston College. For 50 years, he taught religious studies at all levels (often focusing on the Islamic humanities) in Iran, Paris, London, Princeton, Oberlin, Exeter University, and most recently, at BC. He lectures to public audiences and leads workshops in America, Europe, and across the Muslim world, from Morocco to Indonesia. He received the Al-Farabi International Prize for his lifelong publications and teaching around the Islamic humanities (Sufism, poetry, music, ritual, devotions, and popular spirituality). Most of Professor Morris's articles, recent interviews and webcasts, older books, and manuscripts of forthcoming volumes are available on the Boston College e-scholarship website: <https://dlib.bc.edu/> (under "James Winston Morris").

Professor Morris is married and has seven children and stepchildren. Alongside his teaching and research, he has worked at various times in farming, international banking, and as a bus driver, janitor, farm laborer, administrative assistant, translator, and educational consultant.

# “Surprised by God”: Encountering the Real

JAMES MORRIS, Ph.D.

*For years, my heart was seeking Jamshid’s all-seeing cup: / what it already had, it kept imploring from strangers. / This pearl that lies beyond the shell of existence and form, / it kept begging from wanderers lost at the edge of the Sea! [Hafez of Shiraz]*

The unexpected touch of the Real, whatever the outward situation, is always a grace, a mystery, and a bestowed Sign: incontrovertible, unforgettable, ineffable (no matter how hard we may try to speak it), infinitely rich, and open in meanings (if we choose to reflect) — yet it is impossible to repeat, to re-create, or to hold on to that particular momentary, timeless unveiling. Scholars might call such experience a “theophany”: those moments when what the mind had imagined as impossibly transcendent suddenly *is* real, immanent communion, and presence. Here are a few intentionally broad prompts, suggestions about those treasured moments of awakening — whether short-lived or more lastingly transformative — that everyone providentially encounters from time to time:

- Directly witnessing the moments of a birth and first breaths...
- Profoundly sharing in the passage of conscious dying (whether in hospice, hospital, or home)...
- Memorably meeting again someone or something we already knew deeply and intimately “before”: another person, place, language, ritual, gesture, song...
- The awe of “summitting” unexpectedly, in those hidden, suddenly opened-up passages and voices of Nature...
- Magically encountering the penetrating gaze of an unexpected stranger of any age or circumstance (in a dust-filled bus crossing the desert, opening to that regard from behind a veil)...
- Dreams or pre-visions of unknown places or unimagined situations that long afterward turn out to become unexpectedly and completely real, matching this vision in extraordinary detail...
- Previously unheard or taken-for-granted music that suddenly opens up whole new dimensions and unsuspected aspects of the real...

Given the shared universality of such mysterious experiences, together with the endlessly varying cultural and personal interpretations that can so readily color or obscure their meanings, it is understandable that we often tend to ignore those intimations, or to safeguard them quietly in very private places. But every tradition of spiritual practice suggests instead that we must eventually *choose to remember*: That we must take up the intrinsic challenge of active, probing recollection about and reflection on those experiences. Or in other words, that these apparently random first tastes of the Real are the essential seeds and ongoing guideposts for a journey of ever-deeper contemplation, experiment, and exploration. And if the particulars of each person’s resulting inner journey seem necessarily different in their outward details, the practically effective instruments of practice and deepening on that path remain remarkably similar across all times and places. Hafez’s celebrated lines memorably suggest the foundational paradoxes and pitfalls of our endlessly fascinating voyage of realization from and toward — yet always *with* — the Real.<sup>1</sup>

**Footnotes:**

1. In Islamic thought, *Al-Haqq* ("the Real," and also all that is Right and Obligatory) is the most all-encompassing of the infinite Divine "Names" or Attributes underlying all of creation. It includes both the manifested Divine Names and all the transcendent, humanly unknowable dimensions of the Divine. "Realization" (*tahqīq*), in those traditions, refers to our gradually discovering and learning to respond appropriately to the endless "Signs" (*āyāt*) and demands of that *Haqq*. Beginning with the common source of those traditions, the endless facets of that process of realization and recognition are repeatedly described as "Remembrance" or "Recollection" (*dhikr*), from both the Divine and individual human sides.