



the supreme sign

By Scott Hunter

I embraced recovery from drug and alcohol addiction completely. When I wasn't going to meetings, I was holding court in front of the Unitarian Church (the same church where I had blatantly smoked pot when I was using and where I'd met Sam on my first day of sobriety). Talking about recovery lessened the chance I'd pick up a drug or a drink again.

I made a new friend in front of the UU church. I'd never noticed the sidewalk stand of Sue, the Wandering Ewe, until I got straight and sober. She sold colorful hats and scarves she knitted from wool she gathered, carded, and wove from her own sheep. I bought a multicolored hat she made from scratch and wore it religiously. She also sold clothing and blankets she gathered on trips to Central America. One day she asked if I'd like to work for her, minding the stand while she did other chores.

I blossomed as part of the sidewalk scene in Amherst. Sitting at the stand, selling beautiful clothing and making people happy made me happy, gave me purpose and a positive role to play. No longer an outcast, I was motivated not only to help Sue, but to share my happiness with the customers. I experienced the sensa-

tion of Not Me. I saw myself from above, part of the scenery, the meditating monk in the reality of other people.

When I wasn't working for Sue, I visited the Sophia Bookshop (Sirius Books' new incarnation) to get out of the cold and look at books. I knew Sandy, the owner, but had never really talked with her. Now that I was sober, we became friends. I shared my joy with her talking about my wild and crazy life and how empowering sobriety was. One afternoon she asked if I'd like to clerk in the bookstore part-time and help with the inventory.

Sophia Bookshop became my spiritual home. I was surrounded by a collection of Eastern and Mideastern books, Islamic, Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist, and Zen. The year-end inventory introduced me to all of them. Before computers, we did the inventory with pencil and Rolodex cards. Each card recorded a book title and the number of copies in the store. Every time a book was sold, I found its card and lowered the number of books remaining. If someone came into the store and asked for a book and we had it, I could walk to the shelf where it was, pick it out, and hand it to them.

With the advent of computers, my relationship with the books changed. Each book was an ISBN number on the computer. Since I didn't want to lose touch with the books, when there were no customers, I would browse through each and every book in the store. Occasionally I would put a book aside and buy it later, at a discount, of course.

One slow afternoon, as I was browsing the bookshelves, I noticed a few books sticking out. I attempted to push them back in line but couldn't. Removing the protruding books, I found one wedged behind them. It was a small, thin, dusty volume that looked like it had been there a long time. The price on the back cover was \$1.95. In the mid '80s, soft-cover books were \$10.95 to

\$12.95. Sometimes, you could find a book on the shelf for \$7.95 or \$8.95, but those were becoming a thing of the past. A chill ran through me. Finding this book at this time in my life was a bit mystical, as was the name of the book, *The Supreme Sign*. I checked for the title in the inventory. It wasn't there. I felt blessed with such a gift, certainly a supreme sign. I bought it.

I have vivid memories of reading about the author, Bediuz-zaman Said Nursi, an Arabian student who felt an urge to write a book but wasn't sure if he was able. I read that he went to his spiritual teacher and asked, "Should I write this book?"

The teacher replied, "Of course, you should write the book."

I remember that the author occasionally questioned the reader, "Why are you reading this book? Why are you not outside looking at nature?"

After reading thirty pages, having been urged to go outside and observe nature numerous times, I put the book down and went outside and looked at nature. I didn't pick up the book again.

Funny thing is, I have spent the majority of the last thirty-three years outside, landscaping, gardening, running trails, walking with my partner, Kate, just being outside. Recently, I discovered *The Supreme Sign* in my stored belongings. I read the first thirty pages of the book again. It seemed to be total gibberish. There's nothing in the book about the author talking to his teacher or advising the reader to go outside into nature. How did I ever get the idea this book commanded me to pursue the outdoors? What tricks did my conscious and unconscious mind play on me? I still have the book. Every once in a while, I think about reading it. Most of the time, I go outside.

