

## THE LESSONS OF RAMADAN

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

If love were only spiritual,  
The practices of fasting and prayer would not exist.  
The gifts lovers give each other  
Are nothing but outward forms  
But they testify to invisible love,  
Just as outward acts of kindness  
Reveal a loving heart.

Masnavi I:2625:7 by Rumi

These words of 13<sup>th</sup> century mystical teacher and poet, Jalal al-Din Rumi speak to us across the centuries, pointing to foundational religious truths existing in all faith traditions.

Religious and ethical living rests on both inner, invisible intentions and outward forms of expression of those inner motivations.

All who praise and celebrate life, all who struggle to live with compassion and love; journey on the dual paths of inner intention and outward expression.

Religious holy days in all faiths, encourage awareness of these entwined journeys. Even our weekly gatherings for worship and celebration of life aim to inspire both an inner light and an

outward action. Why do you come to church today? What intention do you hold for this day?

On a recent silent retreat, each morning I wrote an intention for the day in my journal. Some days, I had to repeat the one of the day before.

This weekend marks the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar Muslim calendar- the month of Ramadan. This is the holiest month for followers of Islam. It is taught in Islam that the Prophet Muhammad received the revelation of the Qur'an over the course of years during the month of Ramadan.

There are Five Pillars or duties, outward signs of Islam.

The first is Shahadah, bearing witness to the unity of God.

The second is Salat, ritual prayer five times a day. There is *a story told of how the five times a day prayer was decided. When Mohammed traveled up to heaven, he went through many layers of heaven and there met Moses...Moses asked "how many times a day will you ask your followers to pray" and Mohammed responded; "I was considering 50 times a day". "Oh, I don't advise it," Moses answered..."In my experience, that level of faithfulness is hard to come by". Mohammed then thought he would require prayer 30 times a day," oh, I don't advise it", Moses answered, and the conversation went on that way, until Mohammed finally settled on five times a day.*

The third pillar is Zakat or alms tax for the poor.

The fourth is fasting during the month of Ramadan

The fifth Pillar is undertaking the Hajj- pilgrimage to Mecca at least one time during one's life, if possible.

The spiritual practice of fasting during Ramadan is the 4<sup>th</sup> pillar commanded by the Qur'an. Those who participate in the Ramadan fast refrain from eating or drinking from dawn until sunset. It is a time to slow down for the sake of Allah, to offer more prayer than usual and to engage in acts of kindness and generosity. It is also the custom to read the entire Quran during this time.

Sincerity of heart, rather than a boasting attitude regarding one's fast is the spiritual intention of these outward acts.

I wonder how many of us have participated in the spiritual discipline of fasting at some time in our lives? Outward expressions of our inner spiritual lives don't always come easy to Unitarian Universalists. We are just more comfortable moving directly to action on behalf of others. We tend not to dwell in the inner mystery-not to seek knowledge of our inner light.

A portion of my message this morning is to encourage you to find ways to slow down and listen to your inner voice, to become aware of your inner light, to imagine and pay attention to the holy part of yourself.

This is the purpose of spiritual disciplines such as fasting, prayer, meditation, and chanting. To slow down and become aware of your divine self. Where in your life do you intentionally slow down, listen, become more aware? Where does your divine self show up?

Muslims believe that God, Allah, created humans in his image- That we are reflections of God. They believe that we should love God because God loves us. In these words we hear the echoes of Judaism and Christianity, whose religious views were foundational seeds of Islam.

Let us not get hung up on our varying ways of thinking about or defining God or that mystery of many names. We can agree that beauty, truth and love can be seen in many forms and many guises and goes by many names.

Of course Unitarian Universalists will pray in different ways, and will resist calling it prayer...but that hardly matters, I think...it is the acknowledgement of our inner light and our choices of outward expression that matter. Atheists may call that inner light ethical and moral imperative, but whatever name we give, it needs our attention to thrive, and to be a guide in our lives.

Perhaps we UUs have more to free ourselves from than those who embrace the religious heritage of their families. Sometimes we get stuck in what we must get free from and fail to move fully into the freedom of our religious choices. It is a gift that we also have more freedom, more outward forms to choose from.

I think UU's have limited ourselves spiritually...we deny ourselves options, yet many of us still feel hungry for ritual forms to express our inner awakenings. Consider our women's and men's spirituality groups, our small group ministry groups, our youth and middle adult groups...exploration of outward forms is going on everywhere around UUCR. We are hungry to find and live from our inner light.

Once I gathered a group of UUs to participate in fasting during lent. We agreed to fast on Wednesdays during the month of lent, allowing those who needed water or even a snack to set their own parameters- it wasn't what we didn't do or didn't eat that mattered...but what we did do. We experienced hunger and thought about our intentions and what we might learn from a small sacrifice.

We thought more about people who go hungry every day. We experienced community with those who shared those Wednesdays with us. We came to know one another in a deeper way. We reflected on our Jewish and Christian roots and remembered earlier times when we had taken on a spiritual duty. And we celebrated together each Wednesday evening with a potluck meal together at church.

There is power and meaning in sharing ritual within community, it can transform religious community into an experience of religious communion. The solidarity of spiritual intention becomes soul power and can change the world.

Fasting has both an individual element, (no one will know if you stop at McDonalds) and there is a communal element. Religious life is always grounded in community. We need one another to reflect the holy part of ourselves back to us. We need the encouragement of our companions on the journey.

The practice of fasting during Ramadan is centered in the home. And it varies from country to country, culture to culture, family to family. Like liberal Judaism and liberal Christianity- in much of the Muslim world there is acceptance of variation in religious practice.

In many Muslim homes, the family gets up well before sunrise to share a meal in preparation for a day of fasting. Some family members go back to sleep and begin their day a bit later than usual. In predominantly Muslim countries there is greater flexibility in the hours of the workday during Ramadan and sometimes businesses close for the last week or ten days of the month.

There are also exceptions in the requirement of fasting. Children are exempt until puberty, those who are ill or traveling, elderly, pregnant or menstruating women are exempt. Fast days can also be made up at a later time. Islam, like liberal Christianity acknowledges a relationship between each person and their God...there is no need of an intermediary, (the Imams are teachers and prayer leaders- not priests) each person works out their own religious decisions. So participation in Ramadan, except in fundamentalist Muslim cultures, is an individual choice.

Those of us who have not experienced the fast of Ramadan may think it is easy to skip breakfast and lunch and have a later dinner, but what about that morning cup of coffee? In winter it is not as difficult as in summer when a drink of water is really needed. One day of fasting may be easy, but what about one week, two weeks, unless people are firm in their faith and commitment, they may not make it through the whole month.

Even if fasting is difficult, it is often experienced as a joy rather than a hardship. Night time during Ramadan is a happy time. Restaurants stay open late, people are out in the streets, families get together for potlucks, and everyone joins in waiting for the time of breaking fast. Many break fast in the traditional way by eating a date and sipping water-although in some families there is a tradition of elaborate meal preparation which can be a hardship on women who now, unlike the past, also work outside the home.

And near the end of the month there is the holiday of Eid...a feast shared with friends and family. Even if keeping the fast during a hot August day is hard, the breaking of the fast in the evening reminds one that they are not alone...that they are part of religious community, and of an ancient and holy tradition...a tradition with the intention of inner reflection and outer acts of goodness.

Ask your Muslim friends or co-workers about their family customs during Ramadan. No doubt you will find variations depending on their country of origin.

The core lesson of Ramadan, is the same as any other spiritual or religious practice, it rests on intention and sincerity.

Consider your own life, your own commitments, the value of what you do cannot be divorced from the why of your choices. This is true in relationships and in work and in politics, as well as religion.

Intention matters. There needs to be harmony between our inner light and our outer actions.

I believe this applies to secular as well as sacred questions...in fact I believe that the line between the sacred and the secular is very thin...and quite porous.

Take the health care debate- which has edges that touch so many of our thoughts these days...the question of intention is fundamental in that debate...and in the actions of those who are wearing guns to town hall meetings – what is their intention?...or those progressives who are remaining silent...what is their intention?,

or among those who are shouting down elected officials...what is their intention?, or in the quick readiness of the administration to back down on a universal option...what is their intention?

Religious and spiritual people and ethical people too seek purity of heart...a harmony between intention and action...between the inner light and the outer forms.

This harmony can best be achieved through community- for the faithful, like lovers, are mirrors to each other. Sufis are the mystics of Islam and through their prayer they intend to polish their soul...so their hearts become a mirror in which they see God reflected in all things. We see ourselves most fully and honestly through the eyes of others.

Religious practice must have both inner and outer foundations. Unitarian Universalism needs both inner invisible sources of love and spirit and outward visible signs of our loving intentions.

Fasting and prayer and merely ways to reflect on questions such as these. I hope to return to the practice of fasting later this year and issue an invitation to join me in a communal fast, let me know if you might be interested. Let me end with the words of the poet, Rumi.

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So May It Be/Amen/Blessed BE