

Ramadan

by Rev. Don Garrett

September 5, 2010

The 12-year old girl lay fast asleep in the pre-dawn darkness. She was having a happy dream. She dreamed that she was younger, that she'd been playing with her two favorite dolls. She'd washed and dressed them and brushed their hair carefully. Then, all of a sudden, they had blinked, looked around, and both started talking at once. "Don't you miss the way we used to play together all the time?" one asked, while the other said, "This is my favorite outfit, too." The happy dream continued as the three of them chatted away. A smile played over the girl's face as she hugged her pillow.

"Summer! Summer!" a voice was pushing into the dream, calling her name. "It's time to get up!"

Summer squinted up at her mother and protested, "But it's still dark out. It's too early. Let me sleep some more."

"Come on, Summer, it's time for breakfast. You know you have to eat before sun-up. It's Ramadan."

Summer rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and climbed out of bed and headed to the kitchen. There, at the kitchen table, sat her father, with his hair all messed up and pointing every which way like it did before he'd had his shower. He was chewing on focaccia bread and a big hunk of cheese, a steaming mug of coffee in front of him.

"Good morning, Summer." her father said as she sat down. "How about some coca?" He handed Summer her own steaming mug and concentrated on his food. Soon she had a big bowl of oatmeal fixed her favorite way, with brown sugar and raisins and cream.

Her mother joined them with a plate of fruit, bread and cheese, and a cup of Red Zinger tea. "You know," Summer said later as the three of them headed for the living room and their prayer rugs, "I hate getting up early, but breakfast sure tastes better during Ramadan!"

“And the dinners, too!” said her father. It was true. Every dinner during the month of Ramadan was like a special holiday dinner. After all, Ramadan is a month of fasting, so they didn’t eat while the sun was up. And by dinnertime they were all as excited as little children.

Her father told her about what Ramadan was like when he was a little boy in Egypt. When daylight began to fade, the children would go from door to door for gifts of sweets they could eat at sunset. The radio played a mullah reading the Qur’an. And then the call to prayer would come over the radio, too.

But this was America, and there were no Muslim radio stations. Here, it was her father who called them to prayer after breakfast with the same Arabic words Muslims heard all over the world.

After prayers, they finished getting ready, and off they went. Her parents to their jobs, and Summer to middle school. It was kind of hard for her during lunch hour because she had to go to the cafeteria with the rest of her class, and there were all the smells and sights of food. Sometimes when her teacher spent her lunch hour at her desk, she’d let Summer stay behind and read, but not often. If you think school cafeteria food is bad, just try going hungry while everyone else is eating it! It starts to look awfully good. She’d been going to school with the same kids since kindergarten, so she had a lot of good friends who understood why she wasn’t eating this year, but it seemed kind of weird to other kids. And it hurt her feelings that some of them thought she had something to do with terrorism just because she was Muslim.

Since pre-adolescent children, along with the sick and elderly, aren’t expected to fast during Ramadan, this was Summer’s first year. She’d been trying for the past couple of years, but at first it just meant no in-between meal snacks. Then she tried to eat a smaller and smaller lunch, but as long as it’s ok to eat, it’s hard not to. She was proud to be old enough this year to join in the family fast. It made her feel like a real Muslim.

It was the hardest for everybody at the beginning of Ramadan. The hunger pangs would get really strong. But after a few days, the feelings of hunger would seem normal. And her mother explained that she was feeling what poor people all over the world felt when they went hungry even though they were surrounded with

abundance. Summer felt sad for the people who didn't have any choice about being so hungry. Whenever she felt hungry during Ramadan, she'd put a few coins in a special bank to send to those less fortunate.

That sounds a little like our Guest at Your Table boxes, doesn't it? Many Unitarian Universalists take home the little cardboard banks so their children can practice charity during the holiday season. But I wonder if they learn the lesson as deeply as Summer does.

Ramadan is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, five basic things that all Muslims hold in common, no matter how differently they may interpret their meaning.

The first pillar is faith. The word "Islam" is derived from "salaam," which, like "shalom," means "peace." The faith of Islam means to surrender to the peace of God, to let it fill you with its transcendent strength. "There is no god but God," means that people should resist deriving their ultimate values from anything in the created world, whether money, pleasure, power or anything else. An important element of the faith is also that Mohammed is the prophet of God. Islam is unitarian in this way: there are no human gods, just prophets like Mohammed, Jesus, Moses and Abraham. There can only be one absolute ultimate, and Muslims believe that whatever it is, Allah – or God – or simply ultimate reality – must necessarily be beyond human perception or understanding. So Muslims don't have any pictures of God, no anthropomorphic deity at all.

One way they counter the impulse to confine the notion of god to linguistic absolutes is by the 99 names of God. None of them are definitive, but they all point the way toward transcendent truth, toward ultimate reality. Some of the names are: The All Glorious, The Witness, The Steadfast, The Giver of Life, the Producer of Forms, The Friend, The Self-Sufficient, The Guide. The awareness of the inability to give name to ultimate reality extended to beyond the purely theological. The Muslim poet, Hafez, was addressing the inability of language to express the essence of true experience when he wrote poem more than 600 years ago:

I have a thousand brilliant lies for the question:

How are you?

I have a thousand brilliant lies for the question:

What is God?

If you think that the Truth can be known from words,

If you think that the Sun and the Ocean

Can pass through that tiny opening called the mouth,

O someone should start laughing!

Someone should start wildly Laughing – Now!

The second pillar is prayer. Muslims pray five times each day: morning, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night. They prefer to pray in a mosque, but they create mini-mosques wherever they are by kneeling on their prayer rugs and facing toward the sacred city of Mecca.

The third pillar is called purification, but we'd probably call it charity because most Americans don't understand the Islamic point of view on this, that all things belong to God. This is where purification comes in, because the concept of personal ownership is considered impure. Since God owns everything, humans are only custodians of their possessions. They have a responsibility to see to it that all resources are distributed fairly according to need. Most Muslims donate at least 2.5% of their net worth to charity each year. Islam has a strong sense of altruism, so a lot of people give more than that, but it's on the honor system, so the actual numbers are not known. One result of this is an sense of interdependence and mutuality so great that, while there are richer and poorer people, richer and poorer neighborhoods, poverty as we know it is unknown in the Muslim world.

Out of order here, the fifth pillar is the pilgrimage. Muslims who are physically and financially capable are encouraged to visit the city of Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Since Islam is a religion with a known historic founder who spent most of his life trying to return home from exile, it's not surprising that it would place special emphasis on the city of his birth

Lastly, we have Ramadan as the fourth pillar of Islam. During the ninth month of the lunar year, Muslims refrain from food, drink and sexual relations between sun-up and sundown. It honors the month Mohammed spent in a cave and the night he experienced the totality of the revelation that was to become the Qur'an. Mohammed described it this way in the 97th chapter of the Qur'an: "Truly we caused it to descend on the Night of Power. And what shall we inform you of the Night of Power? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. On it descended the angels, and the spirit, with the permission of their Lord, with every command. It is peace, until the break of day."

The twenty-seventh day of Ramadan is the anniversary of that event, and is considered the holiest day of the Muslim year. Several days later, the fast ends with the feast of Id al-Fitr, as Muslims all over the world break their fast together.

Islam is a rich and wonderful religion. When I first studied it, I was amazed at the way Islam resolved many of the contradictions and conflicts within Christianity. Like Judaism, it's a unitarian religion. And, like Unitarian-Universalism, it teaches tolerance and respect for other religions. As early as 634, when the caliph Omar entered Jerusalem, Islam granted freedom of worship and allowed self-determination to all religious communities in the city.

Ramadan is an observance that's not too hard for us to understand. After all, fasting is something common in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Just look at Lent. It started as a 40-day fast prior to Good Friday. It, too, honored a period of seclusion and revelation at the beginning of the religion's founding. But Lent got watered down. As the concept of individual freedom developed, it often seemed to be in conflict with religious customs. The demands of religious observance seemed more and more like the demands of harsh and abusive parents, serving only to diminish feelings of individual worth.

The usefulness of fasting was lost in the argument over religious authority. Fasting fell out of style. When I was a boy, we observed Lent by "giving up something" that you liked. We tried to make it as narrow as possible, like giving up candy kisses or bubble gum, something that would be easy to do. We thought the Catholics had it really hard: they had to give up eating meat. That sounded

like a real hardship to me. But giving up everything during the hours of daylight? That sounds extreme.

But is it? What is the purpose of fasting? Is there something we can actually learn this way? The ability to control our impulses is considered one of the principle characteristics of maturity. Babies have no impulse control: they scream, cry, hit, and eat whatever they want, whenever they want. As we grow, we learn the need for self-control, and we don't learn it gladly. Lurking somewhere, deep inside each one of us, there's an angry baby, upset that it can't do what it wants.

Life's tough enough, we say. Why should we make things any harder on ourselves? Aren't our appetites good things that help to keep us alive? Like Ben & Jerry say, "If it doesn't feel good, why do it?" Evangelical impulse control seems like an outrageously puritan obsession, one that's been described as "the deeply disturbing feeling that someone, somewhere, is having a good time."

But all of this is based on the feelings of that outraged little baby inside us. What about the adult inside us? How do we learn to negotiate the tension between indulgence and repression of our appetites? How do we create a perspective from which we can evaluate our actions? Neither extreme seems useful for this. If we act on every desire, we're out of control, slaves to our own passions. But adopting a set of repressive rules that forbids desire only seems to lead to a denial of selfhood as well.

We want a mature self that's strong enough to evaluate our impulses based on principles in which we believe. And fasting can create an excellent laboratory where we can study and understand our impulses. We may use self-control when we meditate, pray, or fast, but the goal is self-understanding.

Islam sees the ego as the product of the interaction between desire and control. There's nothing wrong with it; it's simply the consequence of living in a body. They compare the ego to a wild horse – you want to tame it, but not break its spirit. But, since the ego is produced by this essential inner conflict, it's impossible for the ego ever to resolve it. Salaam, peace, can only be found through something else, something Islam calls the heart.

So winning some battle against hunger isn't the important thing about fasting. The important thing is to engage in the struggle, to experience the essential futility of trying to make that struggle go away. We can finally understand that, although the ego may be able to give us some temporary security, it can never bring us peace. When we understand this, we can discover the eternally peaceful and loving seat of selfhood – the merciful and compassionate mirror of the Almighty that is the human heart – the true master of the self.

And as young Summer understands, knowing with your brain is different from knowing with your stomach. And knowing with the stomach is different from knowing with the heart. Intellectually, we know there are hungry people. But how deeply can we understand those less fortunate than ourselves if we always eat when we're hungry? There's a Spanish idiom that translates as, "Taste the truth." How can we taste the truth of unsatisfied hunger unless we truly experience it ourselves? And how can we empathize with the hungry unless we let our hearts teach us that love and compassion may be more important than lunch?

Maybe we all could use a little Ramadan.