

Transformed by Faith

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 10, 2024

From time to time, we may have those profound moments of a sacred connection with all we hold holy. The holy – stardust, the awe of nature, a transcendent entity, or the Goddess that birthed us of her sacred womb. For me, the holy is an entity that makes itself known through the beauty and wonder of nature; an intimate, mysterious piece of all that is. And so, I break away from the mundane and monotonous world to hike and immerse myself in nature. I invite my God into my life in open and awe filled spiritual practices – meditating on a tree, the setting sun. These moments - always sacred but not always profound. And yet, I remember a hike, not too long ago, when I felt the sacred present in a powerful way all around my very being. I felt I knew that the holy was in the trees, the grasses, the flowing stream. I felt myself intimately connected to the great, wonderful, wildly unknowable mystery that I call God. This sacred moment lasted but maybe five minutes, and yet I carry this experience with me in each of my days. All that is sacred held in the wind, the grass, the clouds above me. My God and I are connected in each moment.

Why do I offer this reflection? Because of the hallowed time of year Muslims are about to enter. The month of Ramadan honors the time during which the Prophet Muhammad began to receive the messages that would become the Quran.¹ It is held as the most sacred month in Islam. From sunrise to sunset, those of this faith follow a strict fast, abstaining even from the most basic necessity – water. This restraint becomes an act of worship – connecting to a bodily hunger that matches the struggles and hardships of the marginalized, serving as a catalyst for justice work. It also – and this is what we will focus on today – offers a way to cultivate a nearness to God – just as I did on my hike. This is a sacred time of an intentional heightened focus of devotion, paused in unique prayers only offered during this holy month, reading sacred texts connecting to the words of the divine. In letting go of food, one makes space for God. The ultimate goal of this intentional period of restraint and connection? Taqwa,

¹ “The Nourishment of Ramadan Isn’t About Pushing Food Away” by Rahim Snow

translated as God-consciousness – introducing a state of mind that cultivates a constant awareness of all that is holy in each moment of one’s life. God-consciousness.² To expand upon this idea in our own faith language, no matter what we do, wherever we are, what state we are in, God, stardust, great mystery, Goddess – is always with us.³ I use the word God because that is the sacred word of Muslims. May you interpret with your own word for the holy.

Ramadan is a time of intimate connection with all that is holy – God-consciousness. Let us work to interpret this language and theology into our own faith tradition; for we have an unlimited source of metaphors for the great mystery. We may connect with God – sometimes understood as a loving entity of which we are one prayer, one deep breath away from. Or we connect with stardust – knowing that each atom in our bodies has been an intimate piece of everything that ever has been. Or we connect with mystery and wonder – carrying within us the awe of the plummeting ocean filled with life still undiscovered, the vast expanse of the barren desert. Each of these divine, holy, and sacred. So, what happens when these divine interpretations enter our daily consciousness? What happens when we consistently foster these intimate connections? We realize we are part of a vast expanse; something far greater than our individual selves – we fully immerse ourselves in the mystery, wonder, and awe that is all around us. With this consciousness and this connection, we can be reminded of this divinity – this God or stardust or mystery – this divinity present in each of our days as we settle into a mindset of cultivated awareness for every blessed moment. We garner gratitude for all that is – the great improbability of life, of this earth, of the universe. Divinity is always among us. Our very lives are sacred; our days are holy. Life is far from perfect, yet faith offers comfort, strength, and perseverance. Each minute becomes one of meaning, each life a wonder and a blessing, each laugh a communion with beauty, heart, and soul, and likewise each sorrow becomes a piece of collective mourning of which we have each experienced but a piece. We not only gain, but we likewise relinquish that which interferes with sacred connection – hate, anger, and fear – this becomes a piece of the past. Each moment we are guided to respond to

² “Ramadan” from Brandeis University Center for Spiritual Life

³ YouTube – “Ramadan Reflections Ep. 02 – A Metaphor for Life.”

the world and each individual in our midst with love, compassion, and care. We are called towards lives of justice. I invite us into a moment of gratitude, reverence, awe, and wonder – may we carry this into each of our days.

Let us step back for a moment to explore how we cultivate these sacred connections – how we cultivate God-consciousness. What does Ramadan teach us? It is a retreat from the mundane and the ordinary – separating from daily life and inviting the sacred into this new space. It is an invitation towards a holy pause to welcome a spiritual awakening. I see this as an act of profound intention and a deliberate separation from routine. In Ramadan, it is the resolution to enter a month of fasting and increased practices of devotion – reading of sacred texts, pausing in prayers only offered during this sacred time. No longer chasing food and drink, one opens a space for something new and holy to emerge. One will separate from the profane and center in acts of profound and intentional devotion.⁴ Deep, sincere faith does not simply happen; it cannot be taken for granted. It must be cultivated. How can each of us take time away from the mundane, the ordinary, to foster inner growth and a flourishing faith? For me, it is a week in nature. For others, it may be a period of extended meditation or multiple daily prayers. A moment under the stars and the moonlight. It is a time for a heightened commitment to worship – calling us to pray. To meditate. To immerse ourselves in awe and wonder. It is deliberate, it is intentional, it is sacred, it is transformational. It is moments like this where we may encounter those profound, intimate connections with the holy, as I did on my hike. Let us invite the sacred into our midst, to be carried with us into each subsequent day.

What more do we gain from lives of God-consciousness? It is an ability to invite and cultivate spiritual nourishment. Author and teacher Rahim Snow offers, “the main principle behind fasting is to learn that God’s blessings are the true source of nourishment for our hearts and minds and bodies.” God – the sacred, the divine, the holy – this is what nourishes us, in a way food never could. A foundational phrase in Islam is “There is no God but God.” One way to

⁴ “Ramadan” from Brandeis University Center for Spiritual Life

interpret this is, “There is no nourishment except God’s nourishment.”⁵ I think of this in our Unitarian Universalist faith. It’s not the spinach that enriches our immune systems, but the wind that touches us in each of our days, whispering, you are not alone. It is not the milk that strengthens the bones, but the stars above that offer, you are but a small piece of a great, expansive mystery. It is not the eggs that feed the muscles, but the cycles of nature that invite us to reflect, we are connected to all that is, was, and ever will be. It is not the spinach, the milk, the eggs, it is the companionship, the invitation to mystery, the connection to all that is. This is our nourishment. Snow offers, “Ramadan is less about saying no to food and more about saying yes to God” – that which truly nourishes us.⁶ Compassion. Kindness. Love. Friendship. Spirituality. Faith. Awe. Wonder.

It is a time to strengthen the bonds to the sacred, to say “yes” to what the holy asks of us. Snow offers, when we say “yes” to the sacred that he calls God, we think more about God, the sacred, the holy – it becomes a greater part of daily living as we listen in affirmation to sacred murmurings. Yes, I am with you. Saying “yes” is listening to what God is calling for of us in our daily lives.⁷ What does this mean? To me, it is listening and responding in affirmation to the divine trying to encourage us. A divine encouragement to act always in love, service, and compassion. A divine encouragement to make each decision one that cultivates the next best way forward, with as much goodness as can be summoned. Encouragement need not be from an entity – encouragement can be elicited from flowers as natural beauty draws us towards our best lives; lives of goodness, faith, and compassion. Living lives of love and wonder and goodness is saying “yes” to God, to the great mystery, to awe and beauty.

In this practice of strengthening bonds, we are called to reflect upon our relationship with all things holy; Ramadan asks this of Muslims. Is my faith as healthy as it could be? Is my faith and my connection to the sacred deepening? What can I do to deepen and strengthen this

⁵ “The Nourishment of Ramadan Isn’t About Pushing Food Away” by Rahim Snow

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

connection?⁸ This is something to be conscious of, and silently reflected upon for no two answers will be the same. The first two questions are contemplative introductions to the third: what can I do to deepen and strengthen my connection to the sacred? How can we strengthen the connection between the finite and the infinite, or the spark within to the great, unknowable mystery? And while the connection is profound the action need not be. It is the intention that matters. Perhaps a walk in the woods with special attentiveness to the natural surroundings. Perhaps a connection to the innumerable, twinkling stars each evening. A silent pause, connecting to the breath. A prayer offered from the heart to an entity, an essence, a mystery. These acts serve to nourish each of our individual relationships with all that is sacred, holy, and divine. And I return here to our previous reflection – God-consciousness. We are called to invite the calm, the introspection, the peace, the connection, the holiness, of these acts into every moment of our waking lives. That is the faith we are working to cultivate.

What is the sacred calling us to become? How do we respond to this call? To Unitarian Universalist Muslim Summer Albayati, this question runs parallel to another goal of Ramadan – a reminder to return to one’s true self. The divine call is one that begs of us to return to our true selves. Who are we, inherently?⁹ I believe our core is the very first Principle of our faith – we have inherent worthiness, inherent dignity. I believe we also hold within so much love, so much compassion, so much curiosity, awe, and wonder. It is the challenges of life that correspond to a growing hatred, anger, and fear – the detriment of humankind. No. It is love we each carry within. So, what is the divine calling us to become? Ourselves. Beings of love, compassion, empathy, wisdom, and strength. That is our divine calling – to return to who we truly are. With God-consciousness may we answer the call of the divine spirit in each of our days, reminders of self and meaning and purpose and faith. May we engage with the divine spirit in hopes of being transformed, stripped of façades, returning to what is inherent, called back to love. Albayati offers, Ramadan is a chance of transformation.¹⁰ So may we be we.

⁸ “The Nourishment of Ramadan Isn’t About Pushing Food Away” by Rahim Snow

⁹ “Return and Remember” by Summer Albayati

¹⁰ Ibid

Which brings us to our final question – how are we transformed by the acts and lessons of Ramadan? For is this not the reflection we have been returning to throughout? We are drawn away from the monotony we can so easily settle into and are, instead, guided towards a profound faith and spiritual connection through purposeful acts of faith. We are invited into a heightened sense of the divine through intentional practices of restraint and devotion. This is the core of this sacred time of fasting. I offer that not many of us bring the sacred into each mundane moment of life, and yet this is what we are called to do. Together, we nourish the soul, the heart, the spark within. Our lives are sacred and beautiful just as is our connection to whatever it is we hold holy and divine. So may we be led by this beauty. May we be led by faith. By compassion and love. By all that we cultivate in prayer and meditation. May we be led, each day, by all we hold divine and sacred and holy.

May it be so, and Amen.