

“Pillars of Faith”

Rev. Mary Gear

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Opening Words, by Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other'
doesn't make any sense.

Sermon: “Pillars of Faith”

This past week our Muslim siblings celebrated the three-day Festival of Breaking the Fast known as Eid al-Fitr. This celebration marks the end of Ramadan, a holy month of fasting, reflection, and prayer. Eid al-Fitr is marked by special foods, often made from recipes passed down in families for generations. The days of celebration are also marked by special prayers, gatherings of family and friends, and charitable gifts to those who are in need.

Most of the 1.8 billion Muslims world-wide observe Ramadan as it is considered the most holy month of the year. The Prophet Mohammed reportedly said, "When the month of Ramadan starts, the gates of heaven are opened, and the gates of hell are closed and the devils are chained." Muslims believe it was during this month that God revealed the first verses of the Quran, Islam's sacred text, to Mohammed, on a night known as "The Night of Power."

The spiritual practice of fasting is not unique to Muslims. As in many traditions, the purpose of fasting is to offer the opportunity to be closer to God, the Holy, the Sacred. Some of you may have a story or experience of fasting. About 10 years ago, I participated in a vision fast for 3 days and nights, camping in the forest during a rainy June. My intention was to step outside of my usual routine, shed the distractions of

food and drink, and move in to a physical and spiritual space of openness to my inner voice and a connection beyond myself. It was a profound and emotional experience that moved me further along on my path to ministry.

For followers of Islam, the practice of fasting serves both spiritual and social purposes. Fasting helps remind Muslims of human frailty and dependence on God for sustenance. It reduces distractions to allow for focus on the relationship with Allah. And it shows Muslims what it feels like to be hungry and thirsty to encourage compassion for the poor and needy and serves as a reminder of the duty to care for those with less than.

Every day during the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn until sunset. Because Muslims follow a lunar calendar which is 11 days shorter than the Gregorian calendar of 365 days, Ramadan arrives 11 days earlier each year. The practice of fasting can be easier during the shorter days of Winter and harder during the longer days of Summer.

During Ramadan, fasting means abstaining from any food and drink between dawn and dusk, from smoking cigarettes, from chewing gum, and from engaging in any sexual activity. Muslims are also encouraged to curb negative thoughts and emotions like jealousy, as well as to avoid things like swearing, complaining, and gossiping. Muslims do continue other activities during Ramadan, like work and school.

You might expect that Ramadan would be awful, perhaps boring, at least super challenging. It is not intended to inflict suffering; fasting is not required if it is detrimental to a person's health. Ramadan is a time when Muslims are asked to sacrifice. Suffering and sacrifice are not the same thing. Suffering is to be forced to endure pain; sacrifice is to surrender one thing for the sake of something else. There is choice in sacrifice. Ramadan is about surrendering food, drink and other things in order to deepen a relationship with the Holy.

In fact, many Muslims say they look forward to Ramadan for the sense of connecting to so many others who are also experiencing thirst and hunger. There is a strong sense of community, as in “we’re all in this together.” And there is a connection to a long tradition and history of Islam. Ramadan is a time to revisit the ancient stories of Mohammad with study of the Koran, just as Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a time to revisit the ancient story of Hagar and Ishmael.

Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of faith or duties for Muslims. The others are a declaration of faith in God and belief in Muhammad, to pray five times a day, to give to those in need, and to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once if able. Each of these is an example of a spiritual practice of devotion.

Now, words like “faith” and “devotion” are not typically ones that you hear a lot in Unitarian Universalist circles. We have a long history of struggle with the language of reverence, as Rev. Bill Sinkford says. In fact, several of you have contacted me after a Sunday service to ask what I mean when I call Unitarian Universalism a faith tradition. What a great question! I’m a fan of engaging with and questioning language because I believe it helps us connect to our history and discern what we believe and don’t believe.

The conventional definitions of faith are these: a complete trust or confidence in someone or something, and a strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion without question. That’s a stretch for a tradition that questions everything, upholds reason as one of its principles, and doesn’t require a belief in God.

UU minister and theologian Paul Rasor suggests that Unitarian Universalism is a “Faith Without Certainty.” We are a liberal religion, which, it’s important to say, is not the same as being politically liberal. Liberal religions are those with a theology that says that religious history, sacred texts, and spiritual experiences should be interpreted from the perspective of modern knowledge and modern life experience. Liberal religions tend to uphold free and open intellectual inquiry, the authority of the individual’s experience and

reason, ethical dimensions of religion, and making religion credible and relevant to modern times. (Rasor, p.2).

An example of religious liberalism is how we interpret the Bible. Last Sunday I offered as the reading a passage from the book of Genesis that is a creation story. In our liberal religious tradition, I interpreted and critiqued the Bible text based on current and modern circumstances. I preached that a text saying that humans were created in the image of God to rule over all the creatures and the Earth may not serve us well and may need to mean something different today. I also said that “created in the image of God” might be a metaphor for the spark of divinity in each of us. A traditionalist or fundamentalist view of this text would say that humans were literally created in the image of God and are here to rule the Earth and her creatures.

So, faith in a liberal religious tradition doesn’t mean complete confidence and trust in doctrine. It means our faith, our beliefs, are open to change and interpretation based on modern experiences and current events. It means using reason and experience to determine what we believe knowing that beliefs change with new growth and learning. It means, as Rasor says, UU is “an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.”

What might the “pillars of faith” be for Unitarian Universalism? Well, because we don’t have a doctrine, I would suggest that pillars of faith might be searching for truth and meaning and spiritual practice. But I’d also suggest that they might be different for each person. Faith without certainty and with variety.

Devotion is another word that we may not often hear. Emi spoke earlier about their personal experience of extended devotional practice as an expression of love . The definition of devotion is loyalty, deep affection, and dedication to a principle or practicing and believing in a specific religion. This isn’t as much of a stretch for UUs. As we connect and engage with a spiritual community, at its best we develop loyalty, love and dedication to the values and principles we uphold and for the people we are in community with. Even when it’s hard.

At its heart, devotion is about spiritual practice; the practice of being in community, the practice of faith, the practice of justice. I believe that humans long for spiritual depth but may be reluctant to begin and maintain the spiritual practice that might provide it. A devotional practice helps us connect to the divine within us, between us and beyond us. It helps us remember who we are and why we are here. It helps us discover and define our faith. It requires commitment, discipline and sustained practice. And, we break those vows a thousand times. Come, yet again come.

Faith and devotion are what underlie the spiritual practice of Ramadan. Fasting, prayer and charity are actions, they are our doing, but they are the outgrowth of faith and devotion, our being. The practices of Ramadan help Muslims connect with the holy for spiritual sustenance. Perhaps that is a lesson of Ramadan for UUs. When our spirits are fed, our actions are spiritually grounded, outgrowths of our deepest held values and beliefs. The doing and being are intertwined, and both are holy.

I'll end with a blessing in Arabic and English.

as-salaamu 'alaikum (a salaam mau laykume)

Peace be with you.

Justice be with you.

Mercy be with you.

Compassion be with you.

Love be with you.

God be with you. /

Let's be in silence together.