

Sweet Surrender

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The word “Islam” comes from root words meaning surrender and peace. The path of Islam is essentially a road to peace. And yet the image broadcast about Muslims is that theirs is a religion born out of a lust for violence, terrorism and hatred. There can be no denial that fundamentalists distort this peaceful religion for their own ends and nothing can justify the brutality of terrorist suicidal bombings. The image that is front and center in the headlines yesterday and today make it even harder to dispel this image with the grisly attack on the hotel in Islamabad. Our hearts go out to those killed and injured in that terrible blast that took such a heavy toll. This act of violence and hatred seems even more perverse given the timing when many families would be gathering for the special meal after fasting all day during Ramadan. Because of the continuous carnage, it is even more important that we refuse to give in to the portrayal of Muslims as ruthless terrorists.

As you heard in the story from world religions’ scholar, Karen Armstrong in her book, *Islam: A Short History*, Mohammed started out uniting and consolidating the various tribes to avoid further bloodshed and cease the “...vendetta and counter-vendetta” and bring “peace to war-torn Arabia” (Armstrong, 22-23).

Khaled Abou El Fadl edited a short book called *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*. He writes, “Terrorism aims to undermine the moral fiber of its victims. If Americans allow the attacks of September [11] to alienate them from their moral values and from the civil liberties won in countless battles over two hundred years, then the terrorists have won. Similarly, if the Muslim response to the state terror inflicted upon them by Israel and other countries is to become alienated from their religious morality, then Muslims have lost something far more important than the political struggle—they have lost their moral grounding” (Abou El Fadl, 98).

Understanding more about Islam and the spiritual practices of Muslims can help to counter the distortion about this religion founded on principles of peace, compassion and justice, the common ground of religion. All over the world, many Muslims are observing Ramadan, a month long practice of fasting, prayer, gathering for family and community meals and acts of charity and forgiveness. Ramadan is a time of spiritual deepening, to draw nearer to Allah, to God as described in the Qur’an—but also the same God described in the Bible held dear by Christians, Jews and Muslims, what Muslims call People of the Book. Ramadan is a time of balancing the inner and outer worlds—the inner stream of reflection, prayer and devotion and the outer stream of justice, compassion and generosity—all to surrender to Allah and find peace as one does so.

Balance occurs when Muslims cleanse their body through the discipline of fasting from sunrise to sunset and when they reserve a portion of their annual income, if they are able, for those in need, a practice called Zakat. They look at their actions and try to improve their character and relationships. Sometime during the month, it is believed that the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, was received by the Prophet Mohammed. So this

month is a time of study—reading the Qur’an in its entirety if possible, by dividing it into daily segments.

In looking at Ramadan, we are not seeking to appropriate the celebration for ourselves. The value of understanding this tradition for those of us who are not Muslim is to better understand another’s religion and its members and to find practices that create joy, peace and balance in our lives.

Contemporary life seems all about being out of balance. Many of us have self-care plans—to eat regular meals, get adequate sleep, set aside some time each day for quiet reflection or study and other time to walk and exercise to keep ourselves healthy. And then life happens!

I hear how people come home after a long day working or volunteering and collapse into bed. Though they may love their work, the demands prove exhausting. Modern workplaces thrive on employees neglecting their own self-care—insuring that the job gets done even at a great personal price. Cutting out time for spiritual reflection and quiet bankrupts a person of serenity and spiritual depth. Rushing from one thing to another robs us of being fully present and in the moment. Balance and surrender to the flow of life is crucial to living effectively and peacefully.

How have we failed to see that there are two streams of life—an outer life that is fed by inner times of quiet and reflection? Unitarian ancestor Henry David Thoreau had some observations about this in his famous book, *Walden*: “In our most trivial walks, we are constantly, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course, we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighboring cape; ...till we are completely lost, or turned round...Not till we are lost, ...not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the extent of our relations” (*True Harvest*, collected by Barry Andrews, September 14th entry from *Walden*).

In our society, we think we should be certain of everything. We are frightened to lose our way and yet the Transcendentalists believed that we must transcend certainty in order to be guided by that inner voice, to find the true core and the peace and passion rooted deep inside each person.

The other night after a yoga and qigong class in Manhattan, I took the subway to Battery Park and just walked in the moonlight down by the harbor. There by the harbor I reclaimed my balance. I enjoyed talking to people in the City; felt stimulated by human interaction and conversation. During the class, I stretched and revitalized my body and muscles and learned more about familiar spiritual practices from a new teacher. And then on my walk I watched Hasidic couples talking by the river’s edge and saw beautiful sculptures in the moonlight. I walked on till I found the site of the Twin Towers and read the Memorial Plaque. I got turned around but kept walking, embracing finding my way in the darkness. And I returned to Battery Park to suddenly find the Staten Island Ferry Terminal looming in front of me.

For me, that singular night was akin to a spiritual discipline like fasting or praying, grounding my being in the sea of life, lifting the veil that separates us from one another and re-discovering vital energy and the vision Rumi related, “Dissolve in this clear vision. Instead of looking down at the six feet of road immediately ahead, look up.” Looking up, I saw the moon. Looking up, I saw cranes and night lights illuminating the site of the Twin Towers. Looking up, I saw the Ferry Terminal and my way home.

The Islamic religion is very clear about expectations for the faithful. And yet, Sufi mystics like Rumi lost themselves in contemplation of the Divine, in whirling dances and poetry and in the immediacy of life and love. Muslims and their Sufi counterparts find that balance between head and heart, between surrender to Allah in prayer and dance and study of the sacred Qur'an.

In this church, each person finds his or her own fruitful way towards wholeness, towards right relations and insight. We encourage one another to spiritual growth but we do not have a catechism whereby young Unitarian Universalists are expected to all jump onto a singular train and ride it to the end of the track. We have been molded by the Transcendentalists who urged us to follow our own intuition and chart a new course. Universalists lifted up social reform and went into the countryside to share their good news. John Murray enjoined his fellow Universalists, "Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. Let [your light] shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage..."

When these two streams come together, we find balance. We find how to live the outer courage of our convictions while letting go and dipping into the stream of spontaneity, letting ourselves get lost in the river of life and love, floating, trusting and enjoying as Rumi taught. Whatever comes to you in the week ahead, may you make it a priority to do what restores your spirit, perhaps getting lost and meandering a little along the way, and just "enjoying the motion" and looking up. For this is sweet surrender, the practice of balancing the inner and outer streams of life.

Sources, References and Service Readings

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