

THE FAST: MAKING ROOM FOR THE SPIRIT

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Next to sex, the impulse to feed ourselves is probably the most primal and natural of instincts. Eating and reproducing are the foundation of survival, going back to the first simple organisms floating around in the primordial seas. But human beings have developed into rather complicated creatures. To eating and reproducing, we have added thought, emotion, and language to the range of our natural drives.

During the month of Ramadan, practicing Muslims enter into a rigorous schedule of denying what is basic to our nature: Between sunup and sundown—or, in accordance with the Qur'an, during the hours when one can distinguish a white thread from a black thread by natural light—Islamic men and women are not to let any food or drink pass their lips, nor are they to engage in sexual relations of any kind.

But the fast does not only stop there. It is also a fast from unwholesome speaking and thinking. It's taught that any good which is attained through the fast can be undone by the following things:

the telling of a lie
perpetration of slander
speaking disparagingly of someone behind their back
making a false oath
feelings or actions of greed or covetousness

So for approximately one lunar month, a serious practitioner of Islam will strive to engage all of these disciplines of body, mind, heart, and intention. During the hours of darkness, the fast on food, drink, and sexual relations is lifted modestly, and these hours are special times of connecting with family and friends.

The whole fast comes to a close with joyful celebration in the first three days of the following month. During the "Feast of Fast Breaking," gifts are exchanged, beautiful and bountiful meals are shared, and colorful street fairs blossom.

The tradition of Ramadan honors the month of fasting which the Prophet Mohamed undertook somewhere around the year 610. His own rigorous spiritual work culminated in his mystical experiences of the angel Gabriel appearing to him and instructing him in the revelation that would become the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam.

Muslim who engage in Ramadan are seeking to come closer to the human perfection represented in their prophet, closer to the essence of the Quran's teachings, and closer to the Divine source itself.

Fasting is a practice common to many of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. It's a very difficult and powerful form of practice that brings a variety of strengths and benefits. I want to name three main gifts in particular.

1. Fasting makes us visible to ourselves: It confronts us, often painfully, with our own inner turmoil and deepest hungers.
2. Fasting opens a space for something new to come in, or for something new to emerge from inside.
3. Fasting awakens gratitude and compassion

For all these reasons, fasting can be not only personally but socially transforming.

1. Fasting is confrontational. It brings us into painful confrontation with ourselves. Because the body isn't preoccupied with digesting, toxins hidden in the organs are flushed to the surface. There may be a period of discomfort or sickness as the body begins to process the poisons that have been buried within itself. We honestly experience the unhealthy things we have been ingesting. This is not only a physical process of detoxification—it's a psychological and emotional one as well.

I remember a retreat I undertook many years ago: 10 days of silence, 12 hours of sitting meditation a day. One of the dubious revelations of that experience was the absurd number of movies that were stuffed into my brain. Scenes from countless films flickered across the screen of my mind, hours of vicarious experience seared into my emotions and psyche. I had to ask, did I want all that crap lurking around inside my mind?

During a fast, any addictions we may harbor (caffeine, sugar, alcohol, TV, gossip, sex) begin to kick and scream for a fix. All addictions are, in some way, a self-medication that helps us to keep our pain and anxiety at bay. As we bravely turn down that pseudo-medication, we come face to face with our fears, pain and anxious emptiness. In seeing them and feeling them, there opens a chance of recognizing and addressing the deeper hungers for safety, for love, for inner peace.

2. Fasting opens a space for something new to come in.

Imagine that you are trying to move into an apartment, but the previous tenants won't vacate. You can't move your furniture in because the place is full of their stuff. Similarly, the Divine has trouble entering if we don't move our stuff out.

Rumi has a beautiful way of putting it.

*There's a sweetness in the stomach's emptiness.
We are lutes, no more no less.
If the soundbox is stuffed full of anything, no music.
But if the brain and belly are burned clean with fasting,
every moment a new song comes out of the fire.
The fog clears, and new energy
makes you run up the stairs in front of you.
Be emptier, and cry like the reed instruments.
Emptier still, and write secrets like the reed pen.*

*When you're full of food and drink,
an ugly metal idol sits in the temple
where your spirit should be.
When you fast, good habits gather,
Like friends who want to help.*

During Ramadan it is customary for Muslims to spend extra time in prayer, contemplation and in the study of the Qur'an. Into the emptiness created by the fast is poured a spiritual food. That spiritual food has a better chance of taking hold within, and putting real meat on our soul's bones.

3. Fasting puts us in touch with gratitude and compassion

When we have tamed the primal or unconscious impulses that drive our eating, eating can then become conscious. A slice of tangerine enjoyed mindfully becomes a kind of sacrament, a symphony of flavor and meaning. A simple dish prepared by a friend becomes a gift from God. We come to understand how dependent we are upon one another and the whole of life for our sustenance. In this way we become filled with appreciation and gratitude.

But there is another dimension to this awakening, which is our new capacity to identify with the one whose hunger is not chosen, whose fast will not end with treats and the warmth of friendship. We comprehend, in the most visceral way, the experience of deprivation. The need for compassion and justice for our fellow human beings becomes vivid and compelling. This is one of the reasons that, during Ramadan, there is a parallel tradition of charity. Through the pangs of fasting, we come to understand the necessity of sharing.

Now, I would like to switch gears here and take a moment to consider the larger picture of our investigation of spiritual practices.

Our tradition honors the uniqueness of each person's path and spiritual integrity. It is not the same for any two. Each of us moves at our own pace. Each passes through various stages at different times. Each chooses a different route toward wholeness. Each chooses a preferred vehicle for traveling. Our fellowship is found in our willingness to share what we see from where we are, and to listen to and learn from one another.

Our tradition has always been decentralized, from its original roots in early America. Both our governance and our orientation toward the spiritual life have emphasized individual and grassroots authority. We are not a denomination organized hierarchically, but a free association of individuals and churches who interact for our own mutual benefit.

By embracing a wide-open pluralism, Unitarian Universalism gives everyone freedom. Yet UUism also goes easy on us in terms of spiritual challenge and discipline. It demands little of us along those lines. As the tradition evolved into its current pluralistic form, it also abdicated its willingness, its capacity, its authority to instruct its members in spiritual practice.

We have before us a smorgasbord of religious wisdom, resources, and spiritual orientations from the four corners of the world. What a feast! We sample what we are attracted to and leave what is unappealing. This may give pleasure, but it doesn't necessarily give development. Serious spiritual practice involves rigorous encounter, confrontation, struggle, and striving. It is different from dipping and dabbling.

In Unitarian Universalism today, a person who finds the language of spirituality uncomfortable, alien, or intangible, is free to form his own language and process. And yet, another person who wants to take her religious life to another level can find herself utterly without guidance.

We have here in our community, and in the larger Unitarian Universalist community, the whole spectrum, from the noncommittal nibbler to the seriously hungry.

My own hope, with regards to exploring the diversity and meaning of spiritual practice over the course of this year, is that we might all gain both understanding and tools.

My hope is for each of us to find some way to take our journey in meaning to a new level that enriches our experience of being alive.

My hope is that each of us will find a way to make the vision and values of Unitarian Universalism alive in our daily round, to make it live through our breathing, our speaking, our looking and touching.

That through this, we might each feel more connected to our faith, to our world, to each other, to our inner selves, and to the Divine.