

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Ramadan Reflections on Submission and Solidarity
Sunday September 24, 2006

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Children's Message

(Editor's note: You need to read this as the message is well integrated into the sermon following and is essential to references to strawberries at the end.)

Last week I said the name I'd like for you to call me into the microphone—Rev BJ.

Today, will you say the name you'd like for me to call you into the microphone?

I introduced you to my friend **WITS** last week, and want to look at him a bit closer today.

What do you notice about WITS? He's invisible!

Each one of us has a friend named WITS—**Wise Inner Teacher**, and WITS are always invisible. Sometimes they speak to us though - through people or books or stories.

Just the other day my friend WITS brought a story to my mind, when I was trying to figure out how to tell you something—And here's the story:

Once a man was being chased through the jungle by tigers... or it may have been leopards, he couldn't tell for sure. Just as the tigers...or leopards...were about to catch up with him, He burst into a clearing and found to his dismay that he had run out onto the edge of a cliff and the only way to escape the tigers was over the cliff. He peered over the edge and saw.....to his dismay.... some tigers down at the bottom.. Yikes!

Luckily there were some vines growing from the face of the cliff and so he climbed down and clung to a vine, safe for the moment. Then he noticed some mice were on the vine with him and that they were cheerfully Nibbling away at the vine such that very soon the vine was going to break.

He looked around and surveyed his situation.
Mice eating vine. Tigers below. Tigers...or leopards...above.
His heart sank. THEN he noticed a tiny strawberry plant growing from the cliff just within his reach, and on it was a **beautiful bright red strawberry**.

So, holding the vine firmly with one hand and foot,
He reached out, plucked the strawberry, and popped it into his mouth---
Ah, **how delicious he said aloud!**

And THAT is the end of the story.

I first I didn't understand why WITS would want me to tell children
Such a strange story....then WITS helped me figure it out—
Whenever you feel like you are hanging onto a vine, with tigers above and tigers below,
You will always find someone here at the Meeting House who has a strawberry for you.

As a matter of fact, I believe there's someone right down there who has a strawberry for you.

It's Miss Clara--- Miss Alice and Miss Betty..
So if you'd like a strawberry, just take one from her bowl as you go to your class.
Thank you boys and girls, and you may go.

Reading: **Proclaim a Fast in the Solemn Assembly**

You know that Ramadan, the 9th month on the Islamic calendar, features fasting days...from food, drink, and sex during day light hours. What you may NOT know is that New England's historic calendar features fasting days as well. Hear this, abridged from Dean Grodzins, Professor at our Meadville Lombard Theological School:

Fast Day was a seasonal bookend holiday to Thanksgiving.

In the early 17th-century, our Puritan ancestors observed days of thanksgiving to God whenever a remarkably good thing happened, and, whenever a remarkably bad thing happened, they called a day of fasting and penitence for whatever they had done to contribute to the disaster.

By the 18th century, Fast Day and Thanksgiving Day had emerged as regular, state-sponsored religious holidays across New England.

Fast Day observance included behaving in subdued manner, refraining from work, going to church to hear a sermon of admonition and reconciliation, and abstaining from food until evening--when they ate a simple, cold, meal. Being Puritans, they were too delicate to say whether they abstained from sex.

There was a fast day on a Thursday in April and a thanksgiving on a Thursday in November, dates corresponding to agricultural cycles so that one got right with God on fast day so God would bless the planting, then gave thanks to God for the blessing after the harvest.

For a time, it looked as if both Fast Day and Thanksgiving might go on our national calendar. Congress or the President would occasionally call national days of fasting or thanksgiving, as events warranted, but by mid 19th century, when President Lincoln established the national November Thanksgiving holiday, fast days had fallen behind. The last national fast day was called in response to President Lincoln's assassination.

It was not until 1991 however, in this region of steady habits, that fast day was dropped as a legal holiday in the final New England state, New Hampshire.

Fast Day passed, in part, because our theology shifted, and in part because it ran counter to consumer trends of a culture, which had come to observe most holidays by buying things—and on Fast Days one leaves off rather than acquiring more.

There is reason for UUs to consider reviving Fast Day. There is value in an observance that requires somber reflection, recognition of one's personal wrongdoing and the wrongdoing of the world, and that calls for a renewed commitment to turn, personally and as a community towards truth, justice, and love.

Also, fasting as a practice has a rich history of religious meanings, particularly involving increased spiritual awareness and charitable giving, both of which would be valuable for UUs to explore.

Each person would decide for themselves how they would fast, from what they would abstain.

Fast Day would be a distinctive UU holiday, and as such might help us develop a stronger sense of identity.

--Dean Grodzins.

Sermon Ramadan Reflections on Submission and Solidarity

My son and I were off on another adventure.

We had found someone who spoke English in the airport in Marrakech....a good sign...

his English was heavily French and he spoke Arabic to the youthful driver in the vehicle to which we were shepherded.

"Wee, wee," he proclaimed as we zoomed to the edge of the city, vous will be in Quarzazat to meet your friends before they leave there for the Sahara."

It had been a journey of delays, detours and disasters barely averted, and we were more than 24 hours behind the group already.

From Quarzazate we were to trek out, on a 12 day silent walking retreat in the Sahara, wandering 12 miles a day across stony sands, always keeping a Berber on his camel in sight to avoid getting lost, eating dates by day and sleeping in black wool tents by night, not speaking at all.

I was figuring, how James and I would find a Berber to walk us in, if the group had left us, when we careened to a halt and our guide leapt out saying, "Bon Voyage."

"Wait, no, "I yelled, but he was gone.

The young driver looked at me expectantly.

"Do you know the way to Quarzazat?" I demanded.

"Parle vous Frances?" He responded. "Habla Espanol?" James said.

Then they both turned to me and I said one of few Arabic phrases I knew, "Uh...As-salaam Alaikum."
The boy grinned and replied, "Alaykum As-Salām", and off we went.

And went. And went, for nearly three hours.
The sun was setting.
Suddenly the young man careened to a stop,
leapt from the vehicle, and disappeared behind us.

James turned to me and said, "so what do we do now mom?"
I looked at him and then we said in unison our favorite traveling mercies words: "something always happens."
So we waited.

The driver appeared to be on the ground
behind the vehicle, but I couldn't tell what he was doing.
Finally, it dawned on me. Ramadan!!! It was Ramadan.
And he was breaking the fast. He was eating,
having not eaten or drunk all day long.

Shortly, he got back in the car. James said, Ramadan?
The boy grinned, offered us a date, and said "Quarzazate, en shalla!"

The fast during Ramadan is one of the five pillars or practices of Islam,
The other four are prayer, almsgiving, the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca,
and shahadah, the creedal statement.
Sunni Muslims—around 85% of all Muslims,
the world over, embrace the five pillars:

-The passionate Muslim at a disputed sight in Varanasi,
who regaled me with the errors of the Hindus,

-the Muslim girl who took me home to meet her family in Bethlehem
and whose hospitality I could not return because
she was not allowed to enter my Jerusalem hotel,

-the Muslim boy in Bangkok who was competing in the national
Koran recitation contest, and who later came to study with me
at the University of Alabama,

-the Muslim woman from whom I bought a teapot at a Beijing mosque,
-the Muslim child who slipped me a bit of mosaic from the ruins
of Tamerlane's tomb in Samakand.

Imagine the awesome solidarity, of people all over the world
Doing the same five things—like turning toward one point on the globe,
Mecca, several times a day, and wishing well, honoring God-
Good, orderly direction.

Serious, conservative devout, caring compassionate people,
Some of whom live down the street
And work or study at the Hartford seminary's
McDonald Center for the study of Islam,
the oldest program studying Christian-Muslim relations in the U.S.

A Professor there was just named the first female president of the Islamic
Society of North America,
which is North America's oldest and largest Muslim group—

A woman, who lives here!

Thoughtful, caring people, some of whom will be at the University
of Hartford's Mortensen Library tomorrow night for a Ramadan
break-fast event. You want to go?

People-Muslims, some of whom have taken up a challenge
you can read about in the September 11 New Yorker—
the same challenge regarding their faith, Islam
that Unitarians and Universalists took up regarding Christianity—
the challenge of extracting the timeless wisdom from a religion,
and its ancient sacred text, and centuries of historical
and cultural accretions,
all of which can diminish the accessibility to that timeless wisdom.
Islam is as beautifully textured and profound and troubling
as Christianity, and as successful in creating solidarity.

Becoming a Muslim, in Sunni or normative Islam, is a simple matter.
All one must do is, in front of two Muslim witnesses,
recite the creed, the Shahadah:

“There is no God but God, and Mohammed is God’s prophet.”
One of the five pillars.

One semester when I was teaching Islam,
A coed zoomed into my office in alarm.
“I went to the Mosque, the Islamic student center,t
to watch a prayer time like your assignment said.
And afterward a nice family invited me to dinner.
They told me about the Shahadah, and I repeated it after them.
But I want to stay a Christian, so is there some way you can un-say it?”

I assured her that the Islamic Creed is just like all spiritual practices
in that they are really generic—
That is, all religious practices are cars you get into
and then you can go anyplace you like.

In Islam, the car, the creedal statement, takes one to the Shahadah-
God is one, and Mohammed is God’s prophet,
and in my students religion the creedal statement car takes one
to “I accept Jesus as my lord and savior. “

In Islam the car, almsgiving, is an actual tax, the zakat, in Islamic countries. In
our circles, the car, almsgiving, takes one to the pledge drive.

In Islam the car pilgrimage, takes one on the hajj,
takes Jews to Jerusalem, Tibetan Buddhists to Mt Kailash,
and the pilgrimage car takes US to....Boston, or GA!

And so it is with the car, the spiritual practice, of fasting.
According to professor Grodzin UUs might embrace
THAT particular practice to create solidarity for our faith
Where might a fast car take us?

Islam and other religions know the benefits of fasting—
Fasting can strengthen our constitution,
They say that if we eat somewhat less,
We’ll need to sleep less and have more energy.

Good things happen in the body when we eat in moderation,
And that increased energy can go to something beyond
Using the body’s élan vital on digesting food.....

Fasting can feed our spirits too.
There is no cherry, no sun flower seed so delicious
as the 'just one' we choose to eat deliberately.
There is no better way to gain the spiritual attribute of gratitude
For something than by limiting its consumption.

Hunger can give one a whole new perspective
on helping to feed the hunger of others too,
might make one really note the research from the
Hartford Food system, which points out that urban and rural areas
have few grocery stores, when we know that access to food
is fundamental to community well being—hunger might stir us
to call this paucity of food stores to the attention of policy makers
who could create incentives to grocer businesses.

Abstaining from food or something else might move us
to compassionate action.
You know what it did to India when Gandhi refused to eat.

But in Islam the primary reason for fasting is not the benefits
to body, mind, or even spirit.
The main reason Muslims fast, is that it is commanded.
Submission is key in Islam. The word Muslim means one who submits.

Well....UUs MIGHT be convinced to fast for the body,
or to sharpen our minds, or maybe even to strengthen our spirits,
but we'd certainly NEVER do it just because we were
commanded to do so.

Nobody commands us.

But what if submission, like all other religious practices,
is really just a generic principle, **a car we get in, and then customize?**

Might submission be a car to take US, not to Mecca, but to some
soulful place inside with just as much promise?
What might happen if we decided to submit to god—
G,O,D-good orderly direction?

Now, I suspect that you know more about submission than you might think at first glance—
I have found those of you I've come to know a bit to be earnest, reliable, try to do the right thing in your work and personal life, that you..... submit to your spouses 'honey do' list, to your children's "drive me here" needs, to your job description at work, to your garden and your woodpile. You know the merits of submission.

So how might we submit to this spiritual practice of fasting, limit our consumption of something essential, Just briefly, **just this much**, til sunset?

What might you fast? And toward what end?
On what would you spend the energy you gathered from that self restraint?

For many of us, our most precious and rare commodity is time. How might you carve out **just this much time**..... And what might you do with it?

After my father died, I helped my mother make the difficult choice first to stop driving, and then to sell our family home of nearly 50 years, and move into an assisted living facility, which was thankfully near my house and her church, the place her spirit had lived so fully for 60 years.

I promised her that she would NOT have to stop going to church but because I worked on Sunday that promise was difficult to keep. I called her church office and asked if they had a program of driving people places. They said yes, and gave me a name.

Tom answered the phone and said, "Oh I'd be pleased to pick Juanita up on Sundays. Your daddy drove the church bus many a time for trips I took and I'm happy to pass his generosity back to your family."

A couple of months later I was having a party at my house one Sunday night, co-hosted with my colleague Heli who invited some of her friends as well. I was regaling a group with the story of this amazing man Tom who was taking my mother to church on Sunday morning

AND Sunday night, and what a poultice it was to my heavy heart for so much she was losing, when about that time somebody wandered in from the front parlor.

He just stood there looking around, and since I didn't know him, I assumed he was Heli's invitee so I said, "Are you looking for Heli?" He said, "No I'm looking for BJ."

"I'm Tom. I'm taking your mother home from church and she just wanted to come by and say hello to you for a minute. She's in the car and is too pooped out to come greet all your friends, but asked would you come out and sit with us in the car for a little bit?"

Tom fasted his Sunday leisure to help my mother, **just this much**,
And friends, if there is a heaven, I'm sure that my mother is saving a seat beside her for Tom.
There were tigers above and tigers below,
and Tom gave my mother one delicious strawberry.

You have been hanging from that vine, tigers above and tigers below.
And some person in this society has passed a strawberry to you.
Remember how delicious it was?

And you have known a profound solidarity at moments
in the history of the Meeting House,
times when everybody fasted their time or money or energy,
and brought the benefits of that fasting to this altar.

There have been seasons when you knew an awesome solidarity
and all turned to some Mecca of your own making. Remember?
Think for a moment what God, good orderly direction,
Hath wrought here in the past.
You are a formidable force when united.

My friends, our children need our strawberries this Fall.
our parents and RE leaders need your interest, your encouragement,
your presence, your help, your obvious blessings.

Will you proclaim a fast in this solemn assembly,
And then use the energy and resources you garner
to undergird the future of the world that lies in our children?

Will you join me, make the arduous pilgrimage, give the alms,
say the prayer?

Ask. Find out what they need that you can give. **Just this much.** Til sunset.
This Fall. With me. Together we'll have a whole patch of strawberries.

End