

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

## “The Joy of Fasting”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore & Eileen Casey-Campbell February 11, 2018

### Call to Celebration

Many of you will remember our last music director, Matt Edwards, who came from Louisiana. Because he was Jazz musician from New Orleans, we had a number of Marti Gras services that celebrated his heritage. Now that he is no longer with us, our intern Eileen and I wondered what we could do to commemorate the beginning of Lent instead. She studied Islamic heritage, culture and religion in college so I suggested we consider looking at fasting which is practiced by both Christians during Lent, especially on Ash Wednesday coming up this Wednesday, and Muslims during Ramadan which begins this year May 15 and ends June 14.

Now some here this morning might think of fasting as a heavy topic compared to Marti Gras. And because of the problems in the Middle East and the rise of fundamentalist Islam in recent years, some might think people over there don't have a sense of humor. Not so! Humorous stories are often told about a 13th century Sufi teacher named Nassruddin. Here is a story about him to get us going this morning on a lighter note.

One day during Ramadan, Nasruddin was taking it easy in the shade of a walnut tree. After a time, he started eying speculatively, the huge pumpkins growing on vines nearby and the small walnuts growing on a majestic tree.

'Sometimes I just can't understand the ways of God!' he mused. 'Just fancy letting tiny walnuts grow on so majestic a tree and huge pumpkins on the delicate vines!'

Just then a walnut snapped off and fell smack on Mullah Nasruddin's bald head. He got up at once and lifting up his hands and face to heavens in supplication, said, 'Oh, my God! Forgive my questioning your ways! You are all-wise. Where would I have been now, if pumpkins grew on trees!'

As we consider the topic of fasting this morning, let us hold our questions about it till the end of our service as we join together in the celebration of life.

### Meditation

*Like The Morning Breeze* by Hafiz

Like the morning breeze, if you bring to the morning good deeds,  
The rose of our desire will open and bloom.

Go forward, and make advances down this road of love;  
In forward motion, the pain is great.

To beg at the door of the Winehouse is a wonderful alchemy.  
If you practice this, soon you will be converting dust into gold.

O heart, if only once you experience the light of purity,  
Like a laughing candle, you can abandon the life you live in your head.

But if you are still yearning for cheap wine and a beautiful face,  
Don't go out looking for an enlightened job.

If you are listening to this good advice,  
The road of Love and its enrichment are right around the curve.

## Sermon

Sam: I remember as a child going to a diner as a family on Friday to celebrate the end of a tough week. With a little help from my parents I'd finally turned in a big project and my younger sister had gotten an "A" on a science test. It must have been a week or two before Easter because when the server handed us our menus she recommended the fish fry that day if we wanted "to avoid any meat." Our family was not in the habit of avoiding any foods so I asked my mom why we'd want to avoid meat that day. She explained that many Christians practice a kind of fasting during Lent by avoiding meat as a way to show penitence to God. After asking what that big word penitence meant and finding out it meant, as she put it, "Like saying you're sorry to God", I asked, "Do we have to do that too as Unitarian Universalists?" She smiled and said no, we were not under any obligation to fast because of our religion, but if I wanted to try out this kind of fasting today, she would support me. I thought about it for a minute and when the server came back, ordered a cheeseburger.

But the question stays with me today. Why don't Unitarian Universalists practice any fasting, even looking back in our history? Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday, February 14<sup>th</sup> this year, and on Good Friday as well as on Fridays during Lent. Jews fast on Yom Kippur for twenty-four hours as a sign of penitence for their transgressions in the past year. Most other religions have some kind of fast day during the year of varying degrees of severity. Most Protestants, though, make fasting a personal choice.

The source of this voluntary fasting may be because Protestantism focuses on a personal relationship with Jesus. Conforming to church proscribed fasting rules is an external show of piety. Protestants didn't think external rule following would bring about one's salvation. They thought only an inner change of heart and sanctification by grace could bring about salvation. John Calvin, one of our religious ancestors we rebelled against, thought that our entire lives should be "tempered

with frugality and sobriety.” That inner severity could be a kind of “perpetual fasting.” (You can see why our ancestors thought Calvin was such a kill-joy.)

Protestant churches still valued fasting but thought it should be a personal choice not a collective obligation.

This is where the big divide between traditional Protestant and Catholic theology lies. The Catholics believe acts collectively done by the believing community are required by God for our salvation. The Protestants generally think that we cannot do anything to make ourselves acceptable even penance done collectively or individually. We cannot obligate God to save us by our ostentatious shows of self-righteousness or humble supplications of unworthiness. We are so mired in sin that we can only be saved by God’s freely given Grace and forgiven independent of anything we can try to do to merit salvation.

Somewhere along the way, the idea of even voluntary fasting has slipped out of common Unitarian or Universalist practice. This may be because we haven’t been all that worried about doing something to merit salvation. The Universalists believed we were already saved. The Unitarians didn’t see the value of fasting for changing our hearts. They focused on how we could grow and develop our character to live a better life in this world rather than to earn a berth in heaven.

Still, I wonder if we’ve lost something by not practicing fasting.

Eileen: Allow me, if you will, to tell you a little bit about a different kind of religious fasting. Ramadan is the annual Muslim month-long fast, which was established to celebrate Muhammad's first moment of revelation. Since 624 CE, Muslims around the world have spent 30 days every lunar year, try to fast from food and drink during daylight hours, as well as from negative behaviors like deceitfulness, fighting, and gossip. They are also compelled to increase their offerings of generosity to people in need during this time. Most consider the fast an opportunity to redirect the resources normally spent on food toward alleviating the pain of poverty for others. At the end of each day, fasts are broken in a celebratory community meal, call an *iftar*.

Like most spiritual obligations in Islam, the charge to observe Ramadan is held lightly. Travelers, small children, people who are pregnant, breastfeeding, or menstruating, people who are ill, are all encouraged to modify or skip the discipline of fasting. The Quran tells Muslims, “God desires ease for you; God does not desire hardship for you; but that you should complete the period [of fasting], and that you should magnify God for having guided you, and that perhaps you may be thankful.” It is a spiritual discipline rooted in joy and gratitude--for community, for the blessing of food, for the connection to those without enough of it. We’d be hard-pressed to find an example of penitent shame in the practice of Ramadan. After all, God desires ease for you.

I asked some Muslim friends to share some of their experiences with fasting. Here is what Sumaiya, a recent college graduate said,

*SUMAYLA ISLAM: Fasting to me is about renewing my faith. The first week for me can definitely be a difficult transition, but personally I always feel amazing beginning the third day of fasting and throughout the month. I feel physically, spiritually, and mentally renewed. The lack of food helps me think about the abundance of my blessings. It's also a time to see what I need to improve upon. Since Ramadan requires a high level of thought of God throughout each day, as I go through the deep spiritual awakening I also start to see the mistakes I've made throughout the year and the state of my relationship with God more clearly. It's a time that helps guide me to become a better me through community, discipline, and the commitment to be the best spiritual version of myself I can be.*

And this reflection is from Fatima, a medical student,

*FATIMA BAWANY: To me, Ramadan is first and foremost about strengthening my relationship with God. Fasting in Islam is considered a sacred act of worship. And although sacrificing food and water might receive much of the spotlight, fasting is in fact just as much about increasing in spirituality, charity, self-reflection, and self-improvement. Whenever I feel hungry or thirsty during the fast, I'm reminded that the food and water I have normally are blessings from God. Fasting reminds me that millions of people in the world do not have these blessings, and that I should be thankful for what God has given me.*

*At the same time, fasting brings Muslim families and communities together. One of my favorite parts of Ramadan is that everyday, I break fast with my family at home, or with my friends and community at the mosque. These fast-breaking meals are always a time of rejoicing and togetherness. Fasting in Ramadan creates a sense of solidarity and brotherhood between Muslims across the world. One of the most touching examples of this I experienced was when I was in Makkah, Saudi Arabia during Ramadan. Everyday, when I would walk through the markets, I would be astonished to see hundreds of people buying packs and packs of food items simply to distribute them to the needy so that they could also participate in the fast-breaking meal. This Ramadan spirit of connectedness and and love are what truly make the month special to me.*

Hymn: 1032 “Daona Naeesh”

**Sam:** The assumption by most Christian traditions is Christians arrive at the beginning of Lent in an unclean state. They arrive with souls tarnished, soiled, and corrupted by sin. They show up in their fallen state and know that they are sinners. Their wretchedness makes them, to use the expression from Psalm 112, “gnash[their] teeth, and melt away.” A way to atone for their sorry state is through acts of penance.

Now, don't get me wrong, I see value in penance. There are times when it is good for us to make amends and clean up our act. During the Jewish High Holy Days, the practice of trying to right the wrongs of the previous year and repair relationships can be a good thing. It is very healthy to be encouraged to deal with the harms we have done to others and see if we can set them right. To be encouraged through yearly rituals to repair relationships and renew them is good for our social health. If we have harmed our own bodies, we can find benefit in having a way to make peace with what we've done and move on to develop or renew self-appreciation and self-care.

I wonder, however, if the healing process of penance is as effective when it is framed as having sinned against God. The framing of our relationship with this Ultimate Being can have the effect of diminishing the significance of our penance. A sense of being a flawed, loathsome creature in the sight of God's perfection can cause some rather deviant behavior to make our penance seem bigger.

Some of the more extreme examples are self-flagellation and wearing a cilice. A cilice is a shirt made of rough cloth or coarse animal hair, commonly called a hair-shirt, that intentionally irritates the skin. It is worn tight to the skin as an uncomfortable reminder of one's sinful state.

Another misuse of penance is to abuse fasting as a way to reject the body and to harm it. The purpose of fasting can easily move from self-purification to self-loathing and punishment. In the extreme case it becomes a medical condition like anorexia or bulimia. Through starving and purging individuals strive to make their bodies look acceptable to an idealized form they can never achieve.

Bodily desires are often in conflict with externally imposed expectations of the way human bodies should function and behave. The gap between social and religious expectations and inner personal urges can be the source of that self-assessment that something is wrong with me, that I am wretched, unworthy or unredeemable.

In this way, religious practices designed to help us purify ourselves become a source of self-destruction, especially as fasting intersects with popular culture.

Eileen: I'd like to share a reading in contrast to our pieces about the spiritual discipline of Ramadan and the purposes of Lent, on the very American spiritual discipline of participating in Diet Culture. It's from Lindy West's book, *Sbrill*.

*LINDY WEST: "[W]hat do you do when you're too big, in a world where bigness is cast not only as aesthetically objectionable, but also as a moral failing? You fold yourself up like origami, you make yourself smaller in other ways, you take up less space with your personality, since you can't with your body. You diet. You starve, you run till you taste blood in your throat, you count out your almonds, you try to buy back your humanity with pounds of flesh....Like most fat people who've been lectured about diet and exercise since childhood, I actually know an inordinate amount about nutrition and fitness. The number of nutrition classes and hospital-sponsored weight loss programs and individual dietitian consultations and tear-filled therapy sessions I've poured money into over the years makes me grind my teeth. (Do you know how many Jet Skis I could have bought with that money? One Jet Skis!!!) I can rattle off how many calories are in a banana or an egg or six almonds or a Lean Cuisine Santa Fe-Style Rice and Beans. I know the difference between spelt bread and Ezekiel bread, and I know that lemon juice makes a great "sauce"! I could teach you the proper form for squats and lunges and kettle bell swings, if you want. I can diagnose your shin splints. I can correct your jump shot. I never did manage to lose weight, though--not significantly--and my minor "successes" weren't through any eating patterns that could be considered "normal." The level of restriction that I was told, by professionals, was necessary for me to "fix" my body essentially precluded any semblance of joyous, fulfilling human life."*

I've noticed we have this habit sometimes to talk about our relationship with our food in contentious terms. We call food, especially very rich foods, especially foods that mark our joyous celebrations, "bad" as we put them in our mouths. We call ourselves "bad" for eating it. "Oh I'm so bad, I really shouldn't," the ritual dance goes, before we celebrate the occasion of Karen-from-accounting's birth. A person is alive! But here we are, robbing that whole blessing of its joy, as we engage in this discipline: "Oh none for me, I really can't afford to be bad today."

We treat diet culture--which is food culture, for America--like a damn spiritual practice. So I'd like to ask us, as a spiritual practice, to change the conversation. Change our discipline.

By all means, we should take gentle care of our bodies. We should not treat them like trash cans to fill with junk. But let's not think about our bodies as machines either, and food as context-less fuel for them. What if we stopped using rhetoric that frames food as an enemy and eating as a moral battleground? What if we refused to participate in any disciplines that are borne out of shame?

Listen again to the words of Fatima about the spiritual discipline of Ramadan: "fasting brings Muslim families and communities together." She calls it a time of rejoicing and celebration. What would change if we could cultivate--together--a spiritual discipline that led us into rejoicing and celebration. Not because it's easy, but because it's hard in the best ways. Something that challenges us, pushes us, pains us even, but not to be smaller, to be better. To be bigger, by connecting us to the wider web of our community.

I'm going to say an un-UU-sounding thing. This is about salvation. The purpose of spiritual discipline is to save us. To save us from the burdensome weight of attachment, from the prisons built up by our own greed or insecurity, from the social systems that divide us, from the torture chambers of self-hate and self-harm, from all these ways we find ourselves disconnected from one another, from the world, from our own deepest selves.

And salvation? Salvation's gotta feel like joy. So if spiritual discipline feels like another prison, keeping us from swimming the river of joy, I suspect we might be doing it wrong.

I'd like to call us to be mindful of that ancient Greek word the earliest Christians adopted: *Eucharist*. It means thanksgiving. How can we discipline ourselves, together, to eat gratefully. To accept all the blessings of this life gratefully. It must mean engaging in true communion: being together with other humans. Sharing the experience of spiritual work in common. Choosing joy instead of shame.

I'm wondering about how we might choose spiritual disciplines, as a community, that lead us into joy. We're only just beginning to think about this need, and we're only two of us. So, we need your help. What would, what *should* a UU fast look like? What kind of fast would call us into deeper connection and community, draw us toward joy instead of shame? You'll find some ideas tucked into your order of service. Maybe you'd like to simply take the list home and mull it over, but if you are interested in choosing one discipline from the list (or from your own wondrous imagination) to participate in together with a group, I'd invite you to hang out, right here, after the service is over. We can choose together, and support one another through the period of our observance.

## **Benediction**

To sum up the benefits of fasting, here are three different voices:

- Pragmatist Ben Franklin declares “The best of all medicines are resting and fasting.”
- The Sufi mystic Rumi invites us saying “fast and see the strength of the spirit reveal itself.”
- Finally Christian pastor Gary Rohrmayer explains “Fasting is more about replacing than it is about abstaining — replacing normal activities with focused times of prayer and feeding on the Word of God.” “The rewards of fasting ultimately lead to a more intimate and satisfying experience with [God].”

Here is our UU approach. Pick your own source and motivation and consider the innovative fasts suggested by Eileen or a more traditional form to join with our Christian fellow travelers as Lent begins on Wednesday.