INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Sharing in the gifts of Ramadan 2020

Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani *Program Coordinator, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Note: *We continue introducing you to some of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute staff who are working to expand our programming. Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani has been working at the institute a few years now was a featured speaker for the Abrahamic Dinner in 2018. She has been coordinating our Lakeshore efforts, particularly in Holland. Thanks to a grant from the Wege Foundation, she now is working with our Kaufman Scholars program for middle and high school students. She helped lead the summer day camp for these students, which this year needed to be postponed because of the coronavirus issue.*

This year, Ramadan, a month of fasting from sunrise to sunset, will be unlike any before for Muslims around the world. Just as our Jewish, Christian, Baha'i, Hindu and Sikh neighbors have had to adjust their recent holiday observances and celebrations, the Muslim community will do the same this week with the first fast day starting Saturday.

The Baha'i community completed their new year days of fasting culminating in Naw Ruz on March 19, typically celebrated with music, dancing and gathering for prayers. But this year in West Michigan it was celebrated while people sheltered in their homes, gathered virtually on a Zoom call. The same goes for our Jewish and Christian communities, who celebrated Passover, Lent and Easter away from the customary communal experiences for which we cherish our holidays.

In fact, one of the things people look forward to most is the opportunity to pause and be present with those we hold dear — the expectation that even if life gets crazy, we are scheduled to make time for those we love most during the holidays. For some, this was the crux of their celebration, and without it, nothing felt the same.

For others, this season of physical distancing has allowed us to broaden our celebrations, bringing more loved ones to our virtual table. As Muslims in West Michigan, my family and circle of friends find ourselves asking: How do we adapt Ramadan in this season of COVID-19, glean the blessings of this time, renew our practice and, most of all, share those gifts with our community?

When I talk about Ramadan to my non-Muslim friends, they hear "no eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset" and think of a month of deprivation. However, for most, abstaining from eating and drinking has a much greater purpose; it serves as a reminder of our intentions for the day. These intentions are common among most faiths: worshiping to get closer to God; practicing with more purity of mind and spirit; and undoing bad habits that may have formed with or without realization, such as back-biting, cheating or worshiping something other than God.

Fasting also serves as a practice of empathy, placing us in the shoes of those who have less — those who do feel hunger pains or thirst on a regular basis — a fact we often forget while living privileged lives in the West.

This opportunity for spiritual renewal, with more praying, practicing good deeds, pausing to reflect, changing bad habits, working in service to our community, reading the Quran (our holy text) and, most importantly, using this time for personal growth, are some of the bounty of Ramadan.

Despite the importance of turning inward during Ramadan, the communal aspects are among the most cherished during this time. While gatherings with friends and family are valuable, reconnecting with the masjid (mosque) is vital. Mosques are the nucleus for Friday focus prayers, iftars, tarawih (ritual nightly prayer) and for some, a home to spend the last 10 days of Ramadan sequestered in prayer

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and contemplation. Just as other communities and individuals have adjusted their holy seasons and celebrations, the Muslims in West Michigan will need to find their own Ramadan groove apart from the masjid.

In previous years, our daily work schedules were compounded by the fast. Waking up in time to eat sahoor (the pre-dawn meal) or being available at sunset for iftar (the break-fast meal) was challenging with the hustle and bustle of life. Ramadan served as a balancing act between school, work or service projects, and our duties during this month of little sleep and fasting for 15-plus hours.

This year will be challenging in different ways. For some, being home all day might make the physical experiences of fasting more salient; they will need to turn spiritually inward to fill that gap. For others, who will be juggling children and working from home, patience may be the most difficult virtue.

Day-by-day, the rippling effects of the COVID-19 crisis are being felt far and wide. Our neighbors, families or friends who once had stable or lucrative careers are struggling with layoffs, furloughs or temporary elimination of their industry. Those who weren't hit the first time around, await the aftershocks of this crisis as it spreads further and deeper.

As many struggle financially, there may not be sufficient food security or abundance at iftar that many are accustomed to; some may need more help paying their bills or be unable to give their annual zakat (2.5% of their wealth designated for charity, which is typically given during Ramadan). They might find the anxiety and stress of these times too overwhelming to feel present in their fast.

Furthermore, while Muslims make up less than 3% of Michigan's population, they make up 15% of the physicians. Many more are in other essential fields right now or find themselves working on the front lines of this pandemic. There are refugee communities, and others who are in unsafe home environments or still trying to get their footing. We must contemplate how we can create sustainable supports for all of these communities during Ramadan and beyond.

We will mourn the fun annual traditions, like Krispy Kreme trips after iftar, but these are not the most important parts of the month. Fortunately, this time gives us the opportunity to focus on the spiritual gifts of Ramadan. Re-centering our schedules, mindset and practices will guide us through this crisis.

Virtual Friday prayer offers the opportunity for those living far from a mosque to participate regularly, when previously they may have had difficulty doing so. Eliminating commute time will allow for more minutes of sleep, a common deficit during Ramadan. Time spent at home will allow for nourishing and/or budget-friendly meals. Most importantly, taking advantage of the extra time to contemplate the mercies of God, for prayers to heal the sick and suffering, and taking action in our community are opportunities to spread positivity this Ramadan.

By surrounding ourselves with family, physically or virtually, we will expand and intensify relationships. Ramadan has copious gifts, and we invite you to join us.

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A mosque in Morocco. This year, the Muslim holiday of Ramadan, which begins Saturday, will be impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, just as religious observances for other faiths have been affected this spring. *Submitted by Douglas Kindschi*

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