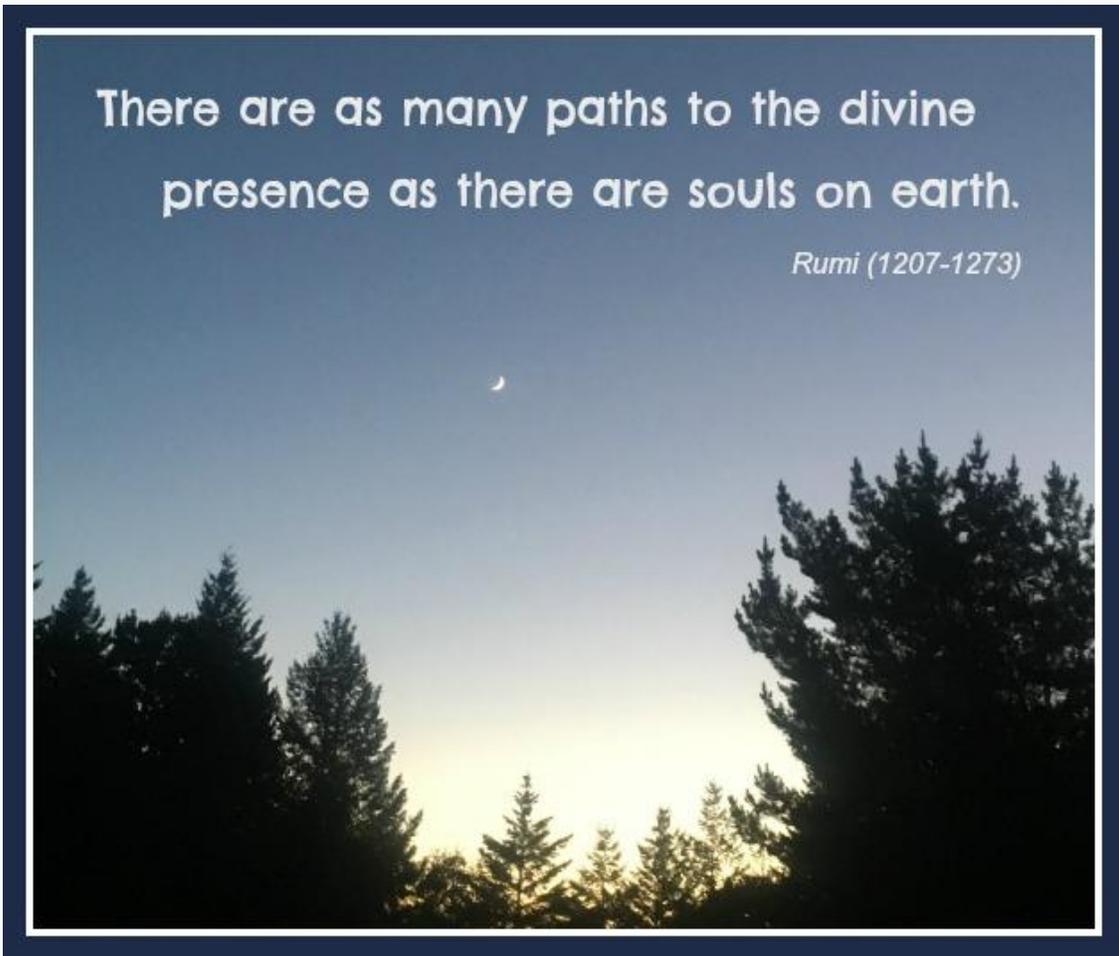


There are as many paths to the divine
presence as there are souls on earth.

Rumi (1207-1273)



RAMADAN MUBARAK

For the world's billion followers of Islam, the holy month of Ramadan began a few days ago. My first actual experience with this important festival was watching a group of energetic Muslim teenagers in Oakland jumping around on a hill, each one trying to be the first to spot the small sliver of the new moon. Then there was a shout which was very exuberantly American — “Ramadan Mubarak”, may you have a blessed Ramadan. I thought it was amazing that the kids were so excited about a month of not eating or drinking between sunrise and sunset. But they knew there was a lot more to this month than fasting.

Muslims say that the central theme of Ramadan is *taqwa* — a consciousness of the sacred. Life during Ramadan is different from life in any other month. The family gets up before dawn and eats a big meal. Teenagers sometimes gather together near the mosque for a predawn meal. There are prayers and making a pledge to fast from all food and drink, smoking, and sexual encounters until sunset. It always impresses me that although children who have not reached the age of puberty do not have to fast, they often voluntarily do so! When they leave the house or wherever they had their predawn meal, life for students can become very difficult. School can be one long period of snacks, drinks and lunch. It's very hard to abstain. Young people are told that this is to prepare them for self-reliance. There is something about the desert in this and the whole Ramadan experience. If we are not able to fast we will not survive long in the desert. If we cannot learn to control our obsessions and distractions we may not do well in life.

At sunset the family assembles again. Sometimes they eat a few dates and drink a little water as the prophet Mohammed did long ago. There are evening



prayers followed by a joyful dinner. Later they all go to the mosque and pray with other families who have had similar experiences. Here they are encouraged to forgive others and to ask forgiveness. And they are reminded that there is to be no vulgarity or dishonesty of any kind during Ramadan. Even natural reactions to personal slights are

to be controlled. There must be kindness at all times and charity, which includes feeding the hungry. At my age I would be excused from fasting but I would have to make sure that a hungry person was fed that day. As the Persian poet Sa'di (1200–1291) put it, "*If you are not moved by the sufferings of others you are not worthy of being called human.*" There is a strong sense of community among those who gather for evening prayers in the mosque. This is the time when people contribute in various ways to relieve the

suffering of local people and those far away.

Most Muslims study the Quran during Ramadan. One particular evening especially commemorates the night when this holy book was revealed to Muhammad in a cave. Some Muslims pray all through that night.

It seems to me that many aspects of life during Ramadan emphasize that I am not the only one who counts. It is necessary to get out outside my preoccupations with myself and to make a better world. Fasting is a good technique for keeping a person focused on that goal.



This is a difficult time for Muslims in many countries. In the United States there is certainly an Islamophobia encouraged by the present administration. This is also a time when young Muslims are trying to find their identity. In many ways our government makes it very difficult for them to see that they have a place here. And when the search for identity is frustrated, youth can turn to radicalization.

This Ramadan there is the sad memory that more than 50 Muslims at prayer were murdered this year by white supremacists around the world. Also, they remember the tragic assault and murder in Virginia of 17-year-old Habra Hassanen as she was walking back from a mosque with her friends after a predawn meal. That took place in 2017, 30 miles west of Washington, D.C. The 25-year-old murderer drove his car into the young people who scattered into a parking lot. He grabbed Habra, pulled her into the car, drove away, assaulted her and then murdered her with a baseball bat. At many mosques in this country you will find a heart containing "Habra" written in chalk each Ramadan.





Are there ways in which people can show to Muslim Americans that we are concerned about their place in society and their safety and their being able to have a happy and spiritual holiday this month? Dina El-Rifai is on the staff of the Quaker American Friends Service Committee. Ms. El-Rifai focuses on combating Islamophobia. She has come up with four simple things that ordinary people can do to prove themselves allies in the struggle for peace and security for our neighbors who happen to be followers of Islam. Here are Ms. El-Rifai's suggestions.

1. OFFERING OUR COMPANY. During Ramadan, Muslims are out very late at night after congregational prayers and also teenagers are often walking early in the morning having had a predawn meal with their friends. These can be especially dangerous times. Allies could offer to accompany Muslims at these or other times. It's very comforting to many Muslims if someone simply says they are ready to give support at any time one feels the need of safety or is simply uncomfortable. If nothing else, she suggests we give our contact information to the Muslims we know and tell them to call us at any time if they feel unsafe.

2. BE CONSIDERATE OF SUNSET TIME. Sister Julie once had a car break down in Oakland when she was carrying a number of children. It was late in the afternoon



when she called for a tow truck. The driver quickly arrived and was very helpful, but he seemed a bit preoccupied about the exact time and kept calling his office to see if the sun had officially set. Finally the office called back and said it had. The driver apologized to Julie and the children but he pulled over and parked, reached into the

glove compartment, and took out several baggies of food which he consumed with much pleasure. He then told them he was Muslim and it was Ramadan and he had been fasting. He was relieved that Julie and the children were very understanding. In fact some of the children reached in their lunch bags and made small contributions to

his meal.

Ms. El-Rifai suggests that we have Ramadan in mind and not set meetings when the sun is setting. If that is not possible, we might have food available so that Muslim colleagues can break their fast.

3. MEDICAL PROVIDERS, EDUCATORS AND OTHERS: BE CONSIDERATE OF PEOPLE WHO MAY BE FASTING. Some doctors send out emails and urge patients to discuss their plans concerning medications, appointments and the like.

Schools present a particularly challenging situation. Ms. El-Rifai urges educators to provide another classroom during lunchtime to give students an alternative to having to report to the cafeteria and watch others eat. She also recommends arranging early exam times and looking for other ways that Muslim students can be accommodated.

4. DE-CENTER OURSELVES AND OUR PRECEPTIONS IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RAMADAN AND FASTING. Avoid saying things like, “That sounds like torture!”, “Why would you do that to yourself?” Comments of this nature overlook the spiritual significance of Ramadan and the physical emotional and spiritual benefits of this holy month. Also she points out that fasting is not a punishment but something Muslims are happy to do that is part of their spiritual practice.



And finally Ms. El-Rifai says, *“And please free to wish us “Ramadan Mubarak” or simply “Happy Ramadan” when you see us!*



Just watching the moon move across the sky is also pleasantly appropriate this

month. That is something all our ancestors did — and munching on a few dates would not be out of place!

Brother Toby