

until Maghrib. But when Maghrib is here, you go slow, for **haste is out of tune: the deepest thanks are made of long silences**. All day you've looked deeply at the sun, you've thought about clocks but also about "time," how it passes, quick or slow according to your inside feelings, and so you see that time is not real. Not a "real" thing at all, just made up. Each prayer, you thank Allah for all the **unknown strength** that you found in yourself that you never thought you had, but He knew all along, didn't He, that you had it in you! **He's made you feel proud of yourself**.

One more thing. You walk in the street and you see the others, the non-fasting ones, rush by & they seem so dynamic & "full." You pass food stores & restaurants & smell the fragrances...are you hungry? Are you envious? **Not one bit**. You feel wonderful. It is you who are strong...**not** them. You are stronger than the strong. You are the courageous, the brave one. You are a winner. You are a Muslim. You can take anything. And in that moment, your heart is so full of Allah that you want to sing.

And you break out into song...Laillaha illalla...There is no god but Allah. Muhammadur rasulullah...And Muhammad is the Prophet (p) of Allah. And you sing to your heart's content. Words and phrases that are not empty like those pop songs...but fill the soul. You are spiritually satiated.

And in the evenings, like tonight, the best times of the year: aren't they? And I'll tell you this. The first days of Ramadan are over & you feel very strange. A friend, your soul, is calling you. You don't want to go back to the old days, the "before." You don't want Ramadan to end. There was a guy in Europe, an artist, and he was hungry for a new way of living, of being, and he tried to find it through his art, and he said, "Astonish me!" He was looking in the wrong place. **Ramadan is the Astonisher**.

It was late, and I thought I had spoken the little one to sleep, but he wasn't sleeping. He took my hand & he squeezed it & he said, very categorically: Next year if you get hungry, I'll help you. Cause I am going to fast too, see. All day. All day, InshaAllah. The he fell asleep, peacefully.

Fasting is **not** easy. Spiritual victory is **not** meant to be a walk in the park. There are degrees of fasting, of course. The Pain of Fasting is twofold. The physical pain is due to the detoxification of our bodies. All the accumulated poison & garbage starts

to come into our blood and we feel dreadful. The soulish pain is due to the conflict in the spiritual realm between your flesh & the spirit. This goes behind the natural desire to eat. There is soulish pain because: 1. Most times our bodies are demanding food three times a day & complain that food is needed when they are denied. A little training in fasting soon clears up this misconception. 2. You **cannot** use food as an emotional crutch to give pleasure, drowsiness, satisfaction & escape. **Instead you must depend on Allah for comfort**. 3. You are brought face to face with other painful issues in your life. Allah reveals the need for you to forgive others, to repent of your wicked ways, to stop running from Him & start trusting Him. There is thus also a spiritual & soulish detoxification which happens when we fast.

Great spiritual victories are won or lost on our willingness to endure spiritual hardship and temptation out of love & faithfulness to Allah. You will experience weakness at times & we like to feel strong & in control. **Fasting teaches us dependence upon Allah**.

To what degree we use the blessed month in overcoming the magnitude of problems in our society is crucial. There's a choice we need to make. Either we halt all good deeds that require us to leave the comfort of our homes and spend our days in semi-hibernation, beating the fast while looking weak & helpless, or we can buckle up and use the blessings of this month to bring a positive change in our community affairs. **Indifference to the plight of the poor is what the annual Ramadan seeks to eliminate**. Discuss Islam with colleagues at work or by distributing Islamic literature. Engage in dialogue.

Women who spend countless hours preparing Iftar meals & fancy dishes, should think twice before the time passes. Think: **Fasting** not **Feasting**. Think: Raising your hands in supplication **not** Recipes in your hands for preparation. Despite the cooking of meals being a good deed, **over-doing** will lead you to a **big loss**. The best gift one can give to their family is to pray for them in this month **when the communication with Allah is at its peak**.

Ramadan is a time of action. Not for extra sleeping & not for vegetating in front of your flat-screen TV. Or for pathologically sharing inane narratives about your life on Facebook. Get your Face in the Holy Book. Way more interesting. Way more valuable. Hello...come to prayer...come to success...

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Ramadan is ACTION AMIDST CONTEMPLATION

The Astonisher

Ramadan: Action; not inaction

On Ramadan 11th, 8 A.H., the Prophet (p) set out from Medina to conquer Mecca with an army of ten thousand strong. Eight years prior to his return, the Prophet (p) left Mecca in a state of helplessness & returned with victory & glory. After the conquest, the Prophet (p), standing near the Kaaba's doorway, gave a historic address to the inhabitants of Mecca. He demonstrated **Islam's great tolerance towards all humanity** by ending his speech with a phrase stating: "I say to you what Yusuf (p) said to his brothers: Have no fear this day, go your way for **you are all free**." An astonishing statement, but expected, from a man sent as a mercy to the world. In the same year & month, the Prophet (p) destroyed all major idols of Mecca, hence clearing all Arabia from idolatry; this being a tiny glimpse of the many accomplishments by Prophet Muhammad (p) and his companions during the month of **Ramadan**. To them, **Ramadan was not a time for rest, seclusion & recitation of the Quran multiple times without any understanding or contemplation**. Rather **it was a time for action with the implementation of Allah's commandments to make a difference in society**. Prayer is **not** preparation for the battle – prayer IS the battle. And of all the things we can do to enhance the power & focus of prayer, **fasting is doubtless the most potent**. The world we live in is working overtime to distract us, to entice us, to win our hearts & minds, our focus, and to determine our vision. **Fasting cuts out the world so we can tune into Allah**. If we are **obedient** to Allah fasting will make us catalysts for revival & awakening.

Is it hard? Tell me...tell me... He's a little boy & he is jumping around, demanding to know. Now – this minute. He's been watching the adults, very serious, little brows knitted in concentration. He has heard the traditions & is beginning to memorize the Quran. He takes my hand & pulls, pulls...Tell me...tell me...tell me. I open my mouth to laugh, but his eyes are serious & wide. And tell me: Did you do it when you were a kid just like me?

It will have to be a real talk, sincere and direct, I can see.

Here is the story of a new muslim sister & her first Ramadan. She is astonished. It wasn't "hard." It was wonderful. This "talk" will give those of us who have had many Ramadans under our belt food for thought. It will also act as great inspiration for new Muslims about to embark on this exhilarating spiritual journey.

It is **not** hard, little one. Not hard at all. And it is **not** "easy." But I was scared at first, before my first Ramadan. I did not fast Ramadan like your parents, sisters, uncles & aunts in those days. I did not fast when I was a kid just like you. I did not know Islam then. You're too young anyway. Allah wants your bones, muscles & brain to grow strong, first. Next year, you'll fast in the morning. If Allah wills, and then you'll see! How wonderful it really is.

But me, when I first entered Islam, I was a big girl, quite an old lady, and I had done a lot of supposedly scary things without any fear, but I was scared, a little, of Ramadan. I did not have much time to "prepare" myself. I became a Muslim one January, and Ramadan came one month later!

Sometimes I would think, maybe I should eat a lot, before Ramadan begins, sort of store up the energy, the reserves, know what I mean? He nods: Oh yes, that makes sense... "And I know you like to eat!" he bursts laughing till he falls on the floor. Ok. Ok. Calm down. Do you want to hear this story or not? Yes, please. He is quiet now, snuggling & attentive. He does not interrupt again.

So I was scared. All day! Every day! I kept thinking. How ever will I manage it? I will never

find the will power! I will faint! And Ramadan began.

The first day, I wasn't hungry at dawn. No way. Could not swallow a thing. As the day wore on. I kept checking myself for signs of absolute starvation. Nothing! Not there. I began to relax. And it's funny, you know, but I really looked forward to the prayer times. I mean, really. Not like on other days: on other days, maybe because I was a new Muslim, I would wonder, is Allah listening? Am I doing it right? What am I doing? Or I would just pray, without much thought, and always to ask for something from Allah.

On this day, I absolutely knew Allah heard me. Because everything was slowed down inside of me, and yet more alert, more real, better. Like when you are completely involved in something, completely concentrated: when you first think a new thought, figure out the solution to some puzzle, observe a wonder of nature, animals, trees, stars, for the first time...I prayed calmly & slowly. I wasn't asking for anything. The prayer was like picking up the telephone when you have been thinking about someone very much for a long time, and dialing the number. I just wanted to tell Allah I was fasting for Him, in His universe, with this "me" He created and aware of things I had never appreciated before, like going to the kitchen for a glass of water. I wanted to talk to Him, just talk...the beauty, see, was this. Being alive and able to feel these things and finally, less selfish. Finally thankful. (The little one looked at me quizzically).

When you're fasting, you'll see, you really do think about Allah all the time. Each time you want something & can't have it, you think that you are doing this, and it is an effort, of course; a real switch on your usual life. You think about Allah's reasons.

You really begin to see them slowly. You don't just see them, you start to carry them inside you, day by day, as the month goes on.

On the first iftar, at every iftar, that first drink of cool water! So delicious, so powerful, so power-filled. **You rediscover water:** you're the dry fields of the earth after the rain, you're a baby beginning it's life! You are blessed indeed: you can drink! So everything gets reshaped, re-assembled in this Ramadan of ours. All of a sudden, what yesterday seemed like the most important necessity you thought you absolutely needed so as to live,

is absolutely unimportant. Now, the truly big things in life come to you: to be hungry & able to eat, to be thirsty & able to drink, to see the smiles on the faces of your family, your friends when Iftar comes, to share the ease of that delightful moment with them, with every Muslim all over the world. To know exactly how they all feel & to feel the same...to be like one single human being all of us together in that one moment. Is this not a precious treasure?

And when you think of the people in the world who cannot have this, for whom Iftar never comes, because they are really poor and always starving, or in pain, or victims of bad, cruel people. Think of all the years of Iftar denied to the Muslims of Iraq/Afghanistan/Palestine by those most cruel warmongers. Can you imagine all the stuff you learn in one day? And you relearn this thought every single day, so that after a month, you start getting the message even when you are **not** fasting.

After the first week, it does get tough, sometimes more, sometimes less. Sometimes the day brings a headache or the sniffles, and you don't feel well: you'd love a warm cup of anything! ANYTHING!!! Sometimes you're cranky. And you remember, you bring to the front of your mind that you cannot act it out. That you have to let it simmer. After a bit, you start to be hungry, more of the time. Your body is losing fat and reserves. Not strength really, but the surplus it had.

Some have it easy, in their cozy rooms. Think of the heat of Makkah; the peasants in the fields across the earth, bending and bending again, in the lands where the sun sets very late every day of the year...the icy fingers of the South or North Pole winds, the frosty high valleys of the highest mountains!

Your head feels like cotton, you daydream and your dreams are very light and like air, and you can think about things quite clearly, and even about things that seem very large, that are very Great...like Allah. They become quite near. Your prayers are like living clocks of your day: they mark the hours, 2 more salat until Maghrib; 1 more

And that you **Fast**, it is **better** for you **if** you only knew.