

Engaging in Something Marvelous: a Non-Muslim Learns from His Ramadan Fast



By Kevin Childress

There simply was no diversity in the small southern town I grew up in. Virtually 100 percent of the population was white, middle-class Baptists. The most “exotic” people in town were a small number of Lutherans, including my close friend Laura and her family. Hearing how people talked about Lutherans, I wanted to defend them, and I started seeing myself as an outsider like them. From that time onward I have identified with outsiders.

As an adult, my life has taken me around the world (for example, I lived in Armenia for two years, working with the Peace Corps). I’ve been to Egypt, Turkey, Russia, India, and all over Eastern and Western Europe. And in all these places I have witnessed expressions of hatred and superiority that one group of people directs at another. No country is free of it. But in those same countries I witnessed extraordinary acts of kindness, sympathy and respect for outsiders.

When I finally got around to it in my 40s, I went back to school to formally study comparative religion (the comparison of doctrines and practices of the world’s faith traditions). It was something I had always wanted to learn more about, perhaps because of my commitment to respecting outsiders. I never wanted to solely study a particular religion, as it is the diversity in particular that most fascinates me, and what I wanted to center my work around.

Two years ago, I read a blog by Lisa Sharon Harper (a columnist with “Sojourners”) about her experiences as a non-Muslim fasting during Ramadan. The idea was appealing to me, as it clearly conveyed a message of respect for, and solidarity with, Muslims.

When I decided to fast last Ramadan, I posted something about it on my Facebook page. That was all I initially said about it to anyone. I prepared myself for fasting with what I thought was practical planning – figuring out schedules for when I would prepare and eat food. I am such an organized person (one of those people with a Master List of smaller “to do” lists), and I dove into it with enthusiasm. For a while it was pretty easy. And I learned a lot of tips. For one thing, it helps to have ready-to-eat food on hand. Late at night, I sometimes just didn’t have the energy to cook. And it’s important to be sure to eat when the time arrives – missing the mealtime window can make for a very uncomfortable day.

Some people say they gain spiritual insight during fasting. It might sound odd, but I have to say that during my fasting time, I found myself reading more poetry, and thinking about the world around me in poetic terms. I rarely ever write poetry, but during fasting I found myself writing haikus about the smell of summer rain, or the intricacies of a well-made shirt. I developed a kind of stillness in my mind that allowed me to “unpack” an idea, to hold it to the light and attempt to see it more clearly. Some people might joke I was simply experiencing protein deficiency or something, but I don’t think that was it. I think I was just a little closer to what I call the “eternal,” and what most people call God.

My post on Facebook attracted a bit of attention. Muslim friends sent me the obligatory “High Five” comments in the beginning, and checked in with me on occasion to see how I was faring. Muslims

I hadn't met before sent me friend requests, because they'd seen something about my fasting on their friends' Facebook pages. As Ramadan went on, people started sharing with me how fasting was altering their views of the world and themselves, often (to my surprise and pleasure) using poetry as a means of communicating their feelings. One friend on Facebook quoted the Sufi poet Rumi, who compared the fasting person to a musical instrument ready to be played: "We are lutes, no more, no less." I had often heard that fasting during Ramadan brought Muslims together,



spiritually and emotionally (through their shared experience), and physically (in breaking the fast every evening). It was interesting to discover the same type of thing happening virtually.

My first invitation to attend an Iftar (the evening breaking of the fast) came from someone I had met on Facebook. At that Iftar, I met numerous people who in turn invited me to other Iftars. Thanks to these invitations, I could easily have gone to a different one every evening, and quite a few of them were interfaith iftars – some hosted by city politicians who weren't even Muslim. And it

was in the gathering together with people to break the fast that I knew I was engaging in something marvelous and important: around the table, as we met and got to know each other, we changed from strangers into neighbors.

As Ramadan continued, what started to be a problem for me were encounters with people who didn't know I was fasting. I would show up at someone's home and they would have this lovely lunch laid out. "I made lasagna because I know how much you love it," a friend said. It reminded me of a time in Armenia when a poor village family had invited me over for a meal. In honor of my visit, they had killed their only goat, and fried its liver. They brought the dish to the table with such pride, and I remember feeling queasy just looking at it. But, in knowing what it cost them – and what it meant to them to serve me – I ate as much of it as I could. So when faced with the lasagna, I made a quick decision to eat it. Later I felt bad about breaking my fast, thinking I had failed. But then I realized I had sacrificed something that was important to me in order to offer my respect and regard for another person. Maybe I hadn't failed after all.

For the rest of Ramadan, I fasted as much as I could, but I broke fast when situations like this arose. A Muslim would never make such concessions, of course – and they would rarely face such situations anyway, since most people know they are fasting. But for me, my fasting had been successful because it prompted me to be mindful of food, and to think about the function of food in society. The sharing of food can break the ice between strangers; it can be a gesture of hospitality, and an indication of trust and respect. And it certainly helps us to celebrate joyful moments in our lives, when people come together around a table to share a meal.

Beside fasting during Ramadan, there are countless ways a person can join in experiencing the faiths of other people. Guests are warmly welcomed at the Jewish Passover Seder, Christmas Mass, a Sikh Diwan, or the annual Hindu Diwali. But what I learned from my Ramadan experience is something that perhaps leaders and members of faith communities should keep in mind: for the people outside your doors who are interested in sharing your faith – they need to be invited. An implicit and generic "We are always open to visitors" isn't really enough. Much better to issue an explicit and specific invitation, a "We invite you to join us next Tuesday" type of thing. Like a meal, the sharing of faiths requires a proper invitation.

About the author: *Kevin Childress is the sole proprietor of [SocialNet Works, LLC](#). While his academic background is in Comparative Religion, his professional background is in Business, with more than a decade of experience in Information Technology, Public/Media & Donor Relations, Executive Management and Finance. He has extensive knowledge of digital imaging, including video production and, of course, all avenues of social media. A 22-year resident of Manhattan, Kevin has worked with religious and civic leaders in every borough of New York City.*