

What Is at Stake in the Burning of a Koran?
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The Unitarian Church in Summit
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Chalice Lighting

[from *Hush, Don't Say Anything to God: Passionate Poems of Rumi*,
translated by Shahram Shiva]:

There is a candle in your heart,
 ready to be kindled.
There is a void in your soul,
ready to be filled.
You feel it, don't you?
You feel the separation
 from the Beloved.
Invite Him to fill you up,
 embrace the fire.
Remind those who tell you otherwise that
 Love
 comes to you of its own accord,
 and the yearning for it
 cannot be learned in any school.

We light this candle for the light of truth, the warmth of love and the fire of commitment. We light this symbol of our faith as we gather together.

Reading

[from *Strange and Foolish Walls* by A. Powell Davies]:

The years of all of us are short, our lives precarious. Our days and nights go hurrying on and there is scarcely time to do the little that we might. Yet we find time for bitterness, for petty treason and evasion. What can we do to stretch our hearts enough to lose their littleness?

Here we are – all of us – all upon this planet, bound together in a common destiny, living our lives between the briefness of the

daylight and the dark. Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame of life, how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?

How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!

Meditation:

[*Silence*]

Brief of life ...

Kindred of spirit ...

Each lighted by the same precarious flickering flame of life ...

How does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?

Spirit of life, we call to mind the things that divide us: misunderstandings, ignorance, difference of ways, competitive ways, fear; and the things that draw us together: the experience of pain, of loss, of joy, of falling in love, treasuring a particular landscape, a people's history, the cultural traditions that ground life through the seasons of a year, birth, life, inevitable death.

May we find ways, make ways to stay present to what draws us together, wrestle our agents of separation into submission, and dismantle the foolish walls of separation until, at least, we can see over the top of them into one another's eyes.

So may it be. Amen.

Reading

[from Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*]:

The words of the Koran came to Muhammed in manageable segments over twenty-three years through voices that seemed at first to vary and sometimes sounded like "the reverberating of bells," but which gradually condensed into a single voice that identified itself as Gabriel's. Muhammed had no control over the flow of the revelations; it descended on him independent of his will. When it arrived he was changed into a special state that was externally discernible. Both his appearance and the sound of his voice would

change. He reported that the words assaulted him as if they were solid and heavy: “For We shall charge thee with a word of weight” [as Surah 73:5 in the Koran says]. Once they descended while he was riding a camel. The animal sought vainly to support the added weight by adjusting its legs. By the time the revelation ceased, its belly was pressed against the earth and its legs splayed out. The words that Muhammed exclaimed in these often trance-like states were memorized by his followers and recorded on bones, bark, leaves, and scraps of parchment, with God preserving their accuracy throughout.

Sermon:

Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting whose last day commemorates the Prophet Muhammad’s first receipt of the holy dictation that would become the Koran, began this year on August 11th and ended on September 9th. It ended just as a firestorm of publicity surrounded a number of issues around Islam that brought to light the uneasy relationship many men and women in the United States have with that faith in this post-9/11 world.

I must confess I don’t often notice when this particular set of holy days is upon us, but this year the events brought the holiday into focus. More so, however, more even than these events, the fact that Ramadan was upon us was brought home by a woman who has become a good friend who received calls from her family in the U.S. to offer her the blessings of the season. Our friend is Afghan, Muslim, an American citizen, and our families are tightly interwoven. Her holy day breaks gently, then, into my family’s world, less threatening than naturally inserting itself, the way a friend’s grandmother or parents become a part of your life over time, and their family stories part of your enlarged vocabulary of human experience.

For a great part of the world, however – a great part of this United States of America, so much of which has remained so remarkably insular within its borders – the world of Muslim or Sikh or Hindu or Yoruban has not yet had a chance to gently break into their world. They stand separated and apart, cardboard figures for projection of exoticism or xenophobic fear, straw men and women for hate and distrust.

Which must be part of what’s at the root of this summer’s controversies over the Islamic Cultural Center and the minister from Florida calling upon us all to burn Korans. But that cannot be all of it.

We laid so much aside in the arguments of this summer, or at least the folks who captured the cameras' imagination did. We laid aside the fact that good Muslim men and women lost their lives on 9/11 too, and were among the first responders whose lungs pay the price for the dust and heat they battled that day. We laid aside the fact that the moderate Muslims working to build the Islamic center two blocks from Ground Zero are the very Muslims we should want to hold up and nurture in our multi-faith, melting-pot nation. We laid aside the freedom of religion that is at the heart of our nation's founding story – many of our own UU fathers and mothers having fled other places because their questioning ways were shunned, and they were determined that no one's ways should be shunned or oppressed on these shores. We seemed to put aside reason and right strategy, founding principles and national ideals; tabled benefit of the doubt and courage of convictions – and when you do all that, you get ripe terrain for hysteria like this summer's.

What brings us to the place of laying so many of the good pieces of our armor for resilient moral living aside in such moments?

At times like these, it seems as if there is some link in the human moral fiber that is missing or too often misplaced. Somewhere between a healthy distrust of the unknown and a natural discomfort with the unfamiliar, there is a link missing that allows us to go from *simple distrust* of the unknown straight to places of ridicule and demeaning acts and hate. Somewhere between natural discomfort with the unfamiliar and dehumanizing the other, *with all that dehumanizing another makes so dangerously possible*, there is a link missing. And fear seems to carry us right across any middle ground. Our lizard brain takes over and the place of *benefit of the doubt* and *open inquiry* is abandoned, still sealed in its original packaging.

Many faith traditions talk about the beginner's mind or the heart of a child as a way of being in the world that is ideal, that we should constantly strive to get back to. Both are ideal because, in part, they involve living first from a place of trust and interest and inquiring, with an *openness* to the world and others and even God, wherever he or she might surface in this world. When fear of the unknown sends us straight across the divide of unknowing to hate, it is this *inquiry*, *interest* and *trust* that are part of what's missing. Perhaps they were selected out by evolution, in favor of obliterating the unknown before it has a chance to obliterate you.

But what is it we are in danger of obliterating? What is at stake in the burning of a Koran?

What is literally at stake is a collection of 114 Suras or passages dictated to the Prophet Muhammad, a shepherd-turned-caravan driver, uneducated, who, according to tradition, was the channel for some of the most exquisite, grammatically correct, poetic language ever written in Arabic. In translation it has confounded scholars and inquiring minds. Carlyle said it was “as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. ... Nothing but duty could carry any European through the Koran” (Huston Smith, p.233).

In its original, however, recited out loud as it is supposed to be, it is said to be in its message and in the melody of its language both transporting and transcendent. Huston Smith writes, “Because content and container are here inseparably fused, translations cannot possibly convey the emotion, the fervor, and the mystery that the Koran holds in the original. This is why, in sharp contrast to Christians, who have translated their Bible into every known script, Muslims have preferred to teach others the language in which they believe God spoke finally with incomparable force and directness” (p.234). All of which is why when Muhammad, as he sought to convert others to the truths that were being revealed to him and was asked what miracles he could produce (to bolster his credentials, I suppose), would respond only by saying, “Do you ask for a greater miracle than this, O unbelieving people, than to have your language chosen as the language of that incomparable Book, one piece of which puts all your golden poetry to shame?” (Smith, p.232).

Only four-fifths the length of the so-called New Testament or Christian Scriptures, the Koran is not to Muslims just a book, even a Holy Scripture. It is God “inlibriate,” to use an awkward word – or God in wordly form. Its closest parallel, in that sense, is to the way many Christians understand Jesus as God “incarnate” or in wordly form. Burning a Koran, then, *is like crucifying Jesus* – far more than a symbolic act like the burning of a draft card.

All of this is different from the scriptures we are most familiar with, like the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures with the various edited and redacted versions, slightly different collections of the texts considered canonical depending on what tradition you are from, with all kinds of accessible translations, from lofty ones like the King James version that have lots of fancy “shalts” and “begats” to ones written in the most contemporary vernacular English. A text that can only be known, only *really known* in a language as nuanced and metaphorical and hard to

learn and wrap our hands around as Arabic – well, that’s about as foreign as it gets. Inscrutable, to use an Orientalist, xenophobic word of old.

Which is the root, I am sure, of even more of the innate discomfort and easy slide into distrust that Islam and Muslims encounter in America. It doesn’t fit our paradigm. Monotheistic, which *is* familiar, but in many other ways deeply foreign. The unity of our being people all grounded in “the book” vanishes when shoes get removed at the entrance to the place of worship, and women get separated out, and as dawn breaks, the call to prayer goes out from the minaret in a language we don’t understand and whose beauty is largely beyond translation.

So all of that may provide barriers to our understanding of Islam. Yet the lived experience of being Muslim *is* accessible to us. It is available in English, in easy translation, if we would but ask.

Krista Tippett, the host of a radio program that is now called “On Being,” asked Muslims in America to offer their reflections on the experience of living Ramadan in a program that aired last year and again, by popular demand, this year. The stories were lovely. One woman shared her young memories of the magic of rising before dawn with her family to eat before the fast began and counting down the years until she was 12 and could fast with them. Men and women talked of the challenges of fasting in a country where restaurants don’t close during the day for the month of Ramadan and colleagues and classmates still eat while you restrain your body to clarify your heart and focus your mind. For one woman whose family was from Jordan, it is imperative to return to the U.S. for Ramadan, even changing her ticket at great expense to do so. She prefers celebrating the holiday here, where it is harder to fast and requires more commitment from her. One man talked about his first experience of Hajj, traveling to Mecca during Ramadan and the children who took him at dusk, one by one running up to grab his hand and urge him to the mosque to break his fast. It turned out the children had prepared small bowls by the thousands, each with a fig, fresh fruit and milk, and they could not wait for the pilgrims to come to them, so they went to the pilgrims. Such joy in sharing the holy days, celebration, clarity and joy in the discipline.

Of course, the experience of fasting is not something only Muslims know can be powerful. Christians have fasted for centuries. Jews who are observant just finished a period of fasting leading to Yom Kippur. Hindus fast, some once a week, as they ask for some blessing to be conferred upon their loved ones or larger universe of cares. Those who do it talk about how fasting creates solidarity with the unmet needs and pain of the hungry and poor we too often forget, and frees

time and focuses the mind, and allows them to reach out beyond their own body's needs and breaks open life's routines. It's a discipline as old as human hunger for regrounding and spiritual renewal.

It is your turn now [wrote Rumi, the Muslim poet of the 13th century],
you waited, you were patient.
The time has come,
for us to polish you.
We will transform your inner pearl
into a house of fire.
You're a gold mine.
Did you know that,
hidden in the dirt of the earth?
It is your turn now,
to be placed in fire.
Let us cremate your impurities.

What we lose when we burn a Koran is the chance to catch a glimpse of any of this. When we burn the Koran, we only can do so because we have demonized before we have inquired. Because we have made a stranger an enemy before we have reached out to her with a child's heart or a beginner's mind.

And in so doing, we have failed to build a bridge between our unknowing and our knowing, and make a stranger a neighbor. But so too would we lose a chance to enter into someone's place of awe, spiritual renewal and mystery, or find out what their deepest knowing is and what it makes more possible and alive for them.

In this case, that would mean (among other things) never knowing about this religion in which *language* is believed to be divine; never imagining the birth of a phrase into the world that brought a camel to its knees under the weight of it all. Lost too would be the chance to listen differently to language after this encounter; wondering where there is poetry that could carry *us* on angel's wings with its melody and meaning, or remembering where we once found such language and returning to reclaim it. Lost would be our awakening to another way in which the divine might break in on us and call us to be on the watch for its arrival.

Of course, lost also would be a chance to be reminded of the power of fasting – how it can refocus the mind and renew commitment to the hungry and so much else – which doesn't have to lead us away from ourselves, but back to our

own tradition to find and resurrect what is already there. After all, we're not the only ones who have felt separation from the Beloved and sought to find the way home, as Rumi reminds us. "Love comes to you of its own accord, and the yearning for it cannot be learned in any school." Not in any *one* school.

I am not an apologist for Islam. It has its traditions that I regard as sexist and oppressive to women, and so I still have a lot of questions about them. Its extremists worry me a great deal with *their* brand of blind hate and xenophobia. However, when I stand in my friend's alcove and listen to her speak in English and then Farsi and in that moment realize I am on unfamiliar ground, my love for her means I see this difference not as a threat, but as a doorway or an invitation.

There are plenty of circumstances in which there will not be relationships and love to carry us across our discomfort. *It is, however, our moral obligation even then to fight to see these moments as doorways and invitations, not threats.* Our obligation is to protect against the evil of demonizing others, and so to lay aside instinctive distrust of what is foreign and usher in the beginner's mind instead; to put the child's heart where the survivor's instinct has too long held sway for our species and *first* set the pack's boundaries a little broader and *see – just see* – if they can hold us all safe inside them. This is our commandment as people who want to mend the world, not rend it.

"It is no accident," Forrest Church wrote, "that the two words (the French *coeur*, or 'heart,' and the English *courage*) are so closely related. Courage is when fear speaks and the heart answers. After absorbing fear's best argument, the heart says no" (*Freedom from Fear*, p.xvii).

May we go easily across the divide between the unknown and the known, facing down our fears, seeking knowledge first, assuming difference is a doorway until proven otherwise, not the other way around, and in so doing may our hearts lose their littleness, as A. Powell Davies wrote, and find "how strange and foolish are the walls of separation that divide us."

So may it be. Amen.