

“The Pilgrimage”
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It is with great sadness that I stand here before you this morning, in the aftermath of the brutal attacks in Mumbai this past week. It was with a sense of profound despair that I read the news accounts of the young 20-somethings who entered Mumbai with a plan to kill and terrorize the masses, and who succeeded in killing nearly 200 people. I cringed when I heard that a militant Islamic group had taken responsibility for the attacks, not because I was surprised, but because I fear that there will now be millions of people in this county and around the world who use this incident as a further justification for their hatred of Muslims.

There will be a temptation to blame this incident on the teachings of Islam, a religion whose name means “peace.” World religions scholar, Diana Eck, who teaches at Harvard, has said that in this country we have a “high consciousness” about Islam, but “low knowledge.” This incident will serve to raise people’s awareness of Islam, but not necessarily our understanding of it or of those who practice it.

Fortunately, Muslims all over the world have been quick to speak out against the attacks. An editorial that was published yesterday in Lebanon’s *The Daily Star* said, “there can be no doubt whatsoever that the perpetrators acted in complete violation of the tenets of Islam.”

“Unfortunately,” it goes on to say, “this reality will not stop non-Muslim observers in the West from drawing the inevitable wrong conclusion that the religion allows for – or even advocates – such acts of depravity among its followers. Nor will it stop other disaffected young men and women from committing atrocities in the name of Islam, and thereby contributing to the further denigration of a sacred faith.”

For some, there will even be a temptation not to blame Islam, but to reject all religion. So much violence has been committed in the name of almost every major world religion, they will argue, that the world as a whole would be better off if we just gave religion up altogether.

I, for one, think that would be a sad thing, were it even possible. For religion has also been responsible for much that is good and beautiful and inspiring in this world. Religion brought us the Golden Rule, after all, and religion can be as much a part of the solution as part of the problem. I hope that it will be.

My intention was to talk with you about Islam this week, in part because the children in our Religious Education program are studying world religions this year and in part because we are approaching one of the holy times in the Islamic calendar.

The Hajj begins this week. Beginning on December 6th and continuing through December 9th, close to 2 million Muslims from all over the world will make pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia to fulfill one of the fundamental duties of Islam. Hajj, or pilgrimage, is one of Islam's 5 pillars. The Qu'ran requires that every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to go, make such a pilgrimage at least once in his or her lifetime.

Some of you may be familiar with the so-called "pillars" of Islam – those metaphorical support beams upon which the religion is built. For those of you who are not as familiar, the other 4 pillars include the proclamation of faith – known as the *Shahadah* – that sentence that is repeated with regularity by Muslims, and which you may have heard or read: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger."

A third pillar is Islam is prayer – or *salat* – which must be performed 5 times each day. At dawn, at high noon, in the afternoon, at sunset, and at night, Muslims all over the world are enjoined to lay out their prayer rugs and make prostrations in the direction of Mecca. One of the main purposes of prayer is the embodied surrender to God, and the other is the embodied expression of gratitude. It is said that "every time a bird drinks a drop of water it lifts its eyes in gratitude toward heaven. At least five times a day, Muslims do likewise."¹

A fourth pillar is *zakat* – the practice of giving alms or charity. Middle- and high- income Muslims are required to give 2.5% of their income and their assets annually, directly to the poor. The poorest Muslims are exempt from this tax.

And the fifth pillar is fasting during the month of Ramadan, Islam's holy month.

The *hajj* itself – the pilgrimage – involves a series of rituals, which each of the 2 million pilgrims will perform next week. First, they will remove their clothes and put on the *ihram* – a white, seamless garment – as a sign of renouncing their worldly status and the boundaries that separate them. For the duration of the pilgrimage, they will be one, they will be equal, there will be no distinctions of class, or color, or nationality. They are all Muslims and all equal under Allah.

After donning the *ihram*, the pilgrims will enter *haram*, which is the area around the city of Mecca. And then they will proceed to Mina, a small village within that area which lies five miles to the east of Mecca. There, in Mina, they will spend the first day of their pilgrimage resting and preparing for the rigors ahead of them.

On the second day of the hajj, the pilgrims will spend the day standing on the plain of Arafat, facing Mecca and praying. On the next day, they will make a food offering to the poor, as a way of thanking God for God's generosity. They will also cast pebbles at the pillars in Mina, as if they were throwing stones at the Devil who is said to have tempted Muhammad in that place.

Next, taking off the *ihram*, bathing, sometimes shaving, and putting on new, fresh clothes, the pilgrims will proceed to the Ka'ba, the black cube in the center of Mecca for the ritual circumambulation. Taking turns, the 2 million pilgrims will circle the Ka'ba seven times, reciting prayers, and moving as one unified body – a thing of beauty to behold.

¹ Smith, Huston, *The World's Religions*, Harper: San Francisco, 1991, p. 246.

And finally, to conclude the *hajj*, the pilgrims will run back and forth between two hills not far from the Ka'ba, to commemorate Hagar's frantic search for water for her infant son, Ishmael, from the story of Genesis. They will drink from the ancient well of ZamZam and their *hajj* will come to an end.

All of these pillars, it seems to me – the *hajj* and the prayer and the charity, as well as the fasting and the pronouncement of faith – all of these serve to remind Muslims of their ultimate dependence on Allah – the source of life, the sustainer of life, without whom they would have no life. Each of these pillars, in its own ways, fosters a sense of unity, a sense of belonging, a sense of connection. And each one also, engenders a sense of profound gratitude toward the Creator of all life. Religion, by definition, is that which is meant to bind us together, and Islam is a profoundly successful religion in that sense.

Interestingly, according to Huston Smith, the closest thing in Islam to the Christian notion of Original Sin is something called *ghaflah*. According to this notion of *ghaflah*, we humans forget our divine origins, we forget our connections to the Creator and to one another, and we need to be continually reminded of those connections. The five pillars serve as reminders.

An infidel, according to some, including Smith, is not so much a non-believer as one who forgets this connection and therefore lacks the appropriate gratitude that one would feel if one were to remember the true nature of his or her relationship to that which is Ultimate.

Now, as Unitarian Universalists we include among our sources, “wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual lives.” So, what can we learn from Islam? There are many things, I am sure. But first I want to say a few words about learning from other religions in general.

We can learn *about* world religions – almost as anthropologists or sociologists of religion who stand outside of the phenomenon of religion looking in; and, I'm afraid, that all too often, that has been our approach to other religions. That is how we often learn about them, and that is how we sometimes teach our children about them.

But we do *not* stand outside of religion. We are religious people, too. And we forget that at our peril. We aren't in this game to increase our knowledge, although we may well learn new things from time to time. We are in this game to have our lives transformed, to be challenged and changed, and to make a difference in the world. Those Unitarians and Universalists who came before us believed humbly that they could enhance their own understanding of the divine – and of themselves – by looking to the wisdom in other traditions. And so that is what we are trying to do this morning.

What could we learn from Islam that would help us in our own journeys as religious people? What could we learn as we look to grow and mature as ethical beings?

Some have suggested that our religion would be a more powerful one – a more transformative one – if, instead of simply *affirming* our principles, we actually promised one another that we

would *practice* them. Islam is certainly a religion focused on practice. And at least one UU has suggested that we might consider a UU parallel to the 5 pillars of Islam – one affirmation of a central belief, followed by 4 actions or practices that would support it.

I love the idea, although the particular suggestions didn't resonate with me. This person suggested that our central belief – our starting point for such an experiment – would be our first principle – our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That feels to me like it flies in the face of the very intention of Islam.

Muslims central affirmation, after all, has to do with God, not with humankind. The implications of the Islamic belief in the one God are that we are all connected, all related, all subject to that one God (which is, of course, a belief that Muslims have traditionally shared with Unitarians). We, humans, are to respond to that one God with all humility and gratitude.

If it is humility and gratitude we want to foster, it seems to me that a more appropriate starting place for Unitarian Universalists would be our 7th principle – our belief in an interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part. There is one web, we affirm, and we are all part of it. For some of us, that web may be a metaphor for God, and for others it may not. But nevertheless, it is through that web that we are all connected and related to one another. And a true acknowledgment of that interrelatedness and interdependence would lead us to respond with all humility and gratitude, no matter what our theology.

I am grateful for all those forces that have brought me to life and to all those forces and relationships that sustain my life. I accept my place in the web and I acknowledge that whatever I do has implications for the rest of web. I rely on others, and others rely on me. At times, I can feel this sense of connection profoundly, although at other times – in fact, most of the time – I forget. I lose that sense of connectedness. I act carelessly. I act thoughtlessly. I forget to be thankful. I sometimes do damage to the very web of which I am a part.

What I need now are rituals through which I can be continually brought back, continually reminded of the web and of my place in it. Perhaps what I need are three or four more pillars – or practices – to help hold up my life – to maintain its integrity – the correspondence between what I profess to believe and how I actually live.

One of those practices might indeed have to do with charity. Out of a profound recognition of my connectedness to all others in the web and an equally profound sense of gratitude, I might remember that from those to whom much is given, much is to be expected. And I might make it one of my spiritual practices to give a certain percentage of my income – even my assets – to those who are less fortunate than I, but to whom I am nonetheless bound in all of my humanity.

Another one of those pillars might be something that I can do daily – some practice like prayer or meditation – through which I can remind myself to be mindful each day of the web that upholds and sustains me, and of my place in it, and of my connectedness to the rest of life's creatures through it...if not prayer, perhaps communing with nature in some way...or an exercise in introspection, such as journaling or listening to music. As Rumi has written, "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." "Let the beauty we *love* be what we do."

Could you imagine? How might it transform your life if five times each and every day you focused with intention on that which is greater than you, that which sustains you, that which upholds you, and which gives your life meaning? How might you be changed if five times each day you called yourself back to a place of humility and gratitude and belonging?

A third of those pillars might be something that we would do once a year or so – some ritual that would, again, bring us back into a deep awareness of our connectedness; a period of fasting, perhaps, or an annual retreat, or a season of reflection, such as Advent or Lent.

Or perhaps it would be a week of contributing your time to some meaningful cause that strengthens the strands of the web to which we belong. Perhaps each year, you might spend a week of what would otherwise be vacation time working to build houses in New Orleans, or traveling to Honduras to build schools, or attending a UU Service Committee work camp. Maybe you'd spend some time every year mentoring underprivileged children through the UU Urban Ministry or volunteering at Loaves and Fishes.

And a fourth pillar might be something big – something you do just once in a lifetime, perhaps – a pilgrimage to someplace that you've never been before, to meet people that you'd never have a chance of meeting otherwise, to learn and to share and to establish bonds that, once again, remind you of your connectedness to those outside of your regular circles of friends and family. Building up the web. Understanding more clearly your place within it.

In the old days... actually not even that old... pilgrims to Mecca had to take care not to get lost. The roads were not what they used to be and they couldn't travel by bus or by car. They had to walk across deserts that were hot and unmerciful. To make it to Mecca and back alive was, in and of itself, enough to change a person, to refocus that person's life, and to give that person a renewed sense of both purpose and commitment.

There is a way in which these are desert times. We live in a world, which, although filled with modern conveniences, is still filled with fear and anxiety and dangers. The pilgrimage is a valuable metaphor for our journey through this life. Like the pilgrims of old, we still need to take care and pay attention as we travel through our days. We still have to mind that we don't get lost, that we don't lose our sense of direction or purpose or connection to that which sustains, nourishes, and guides us.

Whether your pilgrimage is an outward one or an inward one, the goals are the same...

- ...to remember who you are
- ...to remember your place in the ultimate scheme of things
- ...to recall your connectedness, your oneness with all others in this world
- ...to humble yourself
- ...to give thanks
- ...and to return transformed.

So may it be in our lives.