

The Spiritual Practice of Fasting©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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There was a lot to chew on and digest in the reading Elizabeth just shared with us, don't you think? The reading offered us a glimpse into the history of fasting, and it spoke to the fact that many religious traditions encourage fasting as a spiritual practice. It also stated what is obvious today, that fasting is countercultural in the society we currently live in. There was one particular sentence in the reading that stood out for me. The sentence is a quote from the book *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* by Richard Foster. Let's hear again what Foster wrote. "The first truth that was revealed to me in my early experiences in fasting was my lust for good feelings." While this sentence stood out from the others, one particular word in the sentence seemed jump off the page when I first read it. You have probably already figured out the word I am referring to—lust. Foster could have chosen a host of other words—words that would have been less charged. He could have used the word craving, which the Buddha might have used to talk about our desires—but he didn't. I think it is quite likely that Foster wanted us to sit with the word lust, to feel it in our gut, and to ask ourselves if we ever feel lust for good feelings, including the good feelings connected to eating what we like, when we like.

Foster's statement offers us an opportunity to consider some of the reasons for engaging in a spiritual practice, and particularly the spiritual practice of fasting. Such practices can help us become aware of what we typically overlook or take for granted, including what we lust for. Becoming conscious of what we take for granted can give us a heightened sense of awareness, clarity and compassion. Spiritual practices can also be a means through which we connect to something greater than ourselves. If we look to the role fasting has played in the lives of great spiritual leaders, we can get an idea of how significant this practice has been in the a variety of religious traditions—traditions as different as Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and Buddhism on the other.

In the Book of Exodus, the second Book of the Hebrew Bible, it is written that Moses spent forty days and nights on the mountain without food or water as God gave him the ten commandments. Since Moses didn't have an iPad, it took a few days to carve the commandments into tablets of stone. In the Gospel of Luke it is written that Jesus went into the wilderness where he fasted, like Moses, for forty days and nights. During that time he was confronted with temptations, temptations which he overcame through his trust in God. And then there is the story of the Buddha, or more accurately, the Bodhisattva. Prior to the Buddha becoming enlightened he engaged in a level of fasting that was extreme. This left him so emaciated that he could touch his backbone by putting his hand on his stomach. After becoming enlightened, he encouraged his followers to eat moderately. In some traditions Buddhist monks and nuns are expected to abstain from food from noon to sunrise the next morning. This practice of abstinence, however, isn't considered fasting in Buddhist tradition. Instead, it is considered to be eating moderately. If I was to go without food from noon to sunrise every day, my body would be letting me know in no uncertain terms that I was fasting.

Many other religious traditions continue to encourage fasting as a spiritual practice. One of them is Islam. Those of you who attended our service last Sunday heard Ruhul Amin speak about the Five Pillars of Islam. One of those Pillars involves fasting during the month of Ramadan. Depending on the year, Ramadan is 29 to 30 days long. This year the fast of Ramadan begins at sundown today. Muslims don't eat or drink from sunrise to sunset during this fast. From now until sunset on June 4, Muslims in our community and around the world will go without food or drink while the sun is up. Here is what the website "islam-guide.com" states about this period of fasting.

Although the fast is beneficial to health, it is regarded principally as a method of spiritual self-purification. By cutting oneself off from worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person gains true sympathy with those who go hungry, as well as growth in his or her spiritual life.

This statement mentions three particular reasons the religion of Islam encourages adherents to fast. Fasting, in moderation, can be beneficial for one's health, it can promote growth in one's spiritual life, and it can facilitate a person's capacity to feel sympathy for others. The feeling of sympathy for others is then embodied and put into action through another of the Five Pillars of Islam, *zakat*. *Zakat* is the practice of giving a certain percentage of one's wealth to the needy.

Like Islam, other religious traditions invite and encourage their adherents to fast as a spiritual practice. And like Islam, many other traditions cite a variety of reasons to abstain from eating and/or drinking for periods of time. None of the religions I am familiar with promote fasting exclusively for personal gain, whether that personal gain is better health, deepening connection to that which is greater than ourselves, or heightened awareness or insight. In all of the religions I know of where fasting is encouraged as a spiritual practice there is an expectation that this practice needs to benefit others as well as the person who is abstaining from nourishment.

We can see this by looking again at the spiritual leaders I mentioned earlier, Moses, Jesus and the Buddha. After engaging in the spiritual practice of fasting each of these great teachers and leaders proceeded to share what they had gained with others. Each one of them encouraged their followers to live in ways that would be of benefit to others. Moses gave his people the ten commandments. These commandments were intended to guide the actions of his people—to help them know what was right and just and what was improper or unjust. Jesus taught his followers to "love one another" and to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the prisoner. And the Buddha encouraged those who came to him to develop attributes that are known as "the four immeasurables or the four abodes." These are loving-kindness, compassion, empathic joy and equanimity. Whether or not each of us agree with all that these great spiritual leaders taught, I think all of us can agree their teachings weren't centered on what would be of benefit just to them. What they taught and asked of their followers were things that would be beneficial for all people.

So far I have been talking about fasting primarily from a ‘big picture’ or ‘worldly’ perspective. I am going to shift focus now. Instead of talking about someone “out there” engaging in a fast, I want to bring the focus to the people sitting in this room—to you. I have no way of knowing how many of you engage in fasting as a spiritual practice. It could be one or two of you, it could be several dozen of you, or it might be none of you. Whether it is none or several dozen, I am certain that a significant number of you have fasted at some point in your life. It is likely that most of you haven’t done a fast as a spiritual practice but many of you have likely fasted none-the-less. If you have ever done a fast—going for a period time without food and/or water, you likely did so for positive reasons. Your positive reason might have been the first one mentioned in the “islam-guide.com” reading I shared earlier—namely for health benefits. I imagine a significant number of us have fasted for 12 hours or more at one time or another on account of our health. I know there have been numerous times in my life when some illness left me uninterested in food and I would fast for 24 hours or more until I felt up to eating. And then there were the times I needed to fast prior to a medical procedure. How many of you have ever had a fasting blood sugar level sample taken? Some of you may have undertaken a fast to do a digestive tract cleanse. I won’t ask how many of you have experienced a colonoscopy. That information is for you and your doctor to know. If you read any of the health and wellness publications you can buy in many stores that sell organic food, you know that some digestive tract cleanses go in and out of fashion periodically. And it may be that a few of you have done a fast in an attempt to drop a few unwanted pounds.

Now that I have brought the idea of fasting closer to home, I want to share a personal story about spiritual fasting. As I mentioned earlier, my body metabolism runs very fast. Because of this I need a significant amount of food several times a day to be able to function even moderately well. Fasting then isn’t something that I would choose as my first or my primary spiritual practice. In spite of that, I can say that I have undertaken a number of fasts which lasted from one to four days. And each one involved going without food or water. Many of you may not be aware of this but for many years prior to becoming a minister I followed the sacred traditions of the Sioux. One of those traditions is referred to in the English language as a vision quest. I had the privilege of being guided and supported by Sioux elders as I undertook several vision quests atop or on the flanks of Bear Butte in South Dakota. Like Richard Foster, one of the things I learned early on was that I had a lust for food. I recall being atop Bear Butte on my first night staring at the lights from the fast food restaurants in Sturgis, South Dakota and drooling. That was a humbling experience—one of many I had while learning and following the Sioux spiritual tradition.

It is because of those humbling experiences, including fasting, that I am a minister, and more specifically, your minister. My time of fasting helped me gain clarity about what brings purpose and meaning to my life—which is to be of service. During the years I was doing vision quests, I was being of service in my career as a social worker. It became clear to me over time however that assisting individuals, couples and families, while a good thing to do, wasn’t being of service at the highest level I was capable of. I could have ignored that awareness. I could have remained in the career I

had been in for more than 30 years. I could have, but I didn't. I came to recognize that I needed to give up what was comfortable, what was known, and begin a new phase in my life. The change in career from social worker to UU minister is an example of the last line in today's reading: "Sometimes you have to empty yourself to be filled."

You, the people of this Fellowship, fill me, and not just at pot lucks and social gatherings. Every day you fill my sense of purpose and meaning in life. For that I say thank you from the depths of my heart. I hope what I offer fills you even a fraction as much as you fill me. In the days ahead, whether you engage in the practice of spiritual fasting or not, may we all seek to live out the last half of our Third Principle, "encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." May we nourish and help sustain one another on our journey of life together.

So may it be.