

BALANCE BETWEEN..THOUGHT FOR THE DAY, 24 MARCH 2024 BY MARIANNA MICHELL

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It's the period of Lent and this year, the fasting month of Ramadhan overlaps with it.

I've never seriously undertaken to follow Lent but, for some years, with others, I joined Muslim brothers and sisters to undertake the fast during Ramadhan. Outwardly, it's 30 days of dawn to sunset without food or drink. That is often seen as the sum of it and, to many, it sounds crazy.

In most churches at this time, Lent filters through everything. But I've focussed on Ramadhan because, despite a period of Methodist preaching many years ago, I did not feel drawn to Lent: I felt it be less clear in human purpose, and responding to literally understood New Testament text. Perhaps later, someone can comment on that from their perspective or experience.

Ramadhan is about discovering what it is like to do without what we normally expect each day; it's about how far that change can alter us. It is not just about food and drink. Smoking, alcohol, sex are also to be avoided up: overall, the fast can reveal how we react when our day-to-day lives are altered. So these deprivations are only the outer expectation. There are behavioural markers too – easily forgotten, especially when the fast is annual and communal. Temptations to get it right can mess up the inner purpose.

Whenever our normal day-to-day pattern is forced to change – for whatever reason – we start to recognise what we can be like underneath, that all too frequently, we react unexpectedly. It prompts us to ask questions. So, there is an inner purpose to this outer practice.

Towards the end of the fasting month, sometimes I would experience a new deep understanding, out of the blue. This is described in Muslim culture as the qadar. On one occasion, the result was an adjustment in my own psychology: an experience during sleep, where I was beating over the head a dark entity that was in front of me -with no effect. Later I understood this to be my shadow self and until that point I had no idea I was undermining myself in some way -beating myself up without knowing it. It was the effect of consistently removing the usual necessities, for a time, that altered my awareness. There were other experiences in years following.

I have spoken before, in this space, about times when stress and depression have brought feelings of fragility -instinctively I reach for others: meeting others' eyes, and making time for people. I might generalise about all of us perhaps: that when we feel buoyant, when we are well-fed by life, and secure in how things are going, we can feel impatient with, and dismissive of others. We don't need them so much. It's easy to have low expectations of someone - hold them cheap. The more confident and self-sufficient we may feel, the less attentive and mindful we are in general. Of course, it doesn't always take us that way. Feeling positive and blessed -we pass it on.

So the Ramadhan fast is about keeping a balance between the outer self and its needs, and seeking to behave well: it's how we look at someone, and we listen to what they say without mental criticism. Likewise, we avoid pushing strong opinions on others - stressing about world situations to the detriment of our mental health. We avoid causing divisions between yourself and others; and we avoid getting bogged down in unproductive anxiety.

If I've understood correctly, this is linked [to Andrew Brown's message some weeks ago](#) where he spoke about swimming 'on the surface', maintaining positive focus on who we are and how we act and react, while recognising and avoiding going under. We swim with regular strokes. This also means not allowing influences -for instance, other people's opinion of us -to take us down.

We need to keep a balance in other ways: between using our will -forcing something along - and Letting Go, letting God. This is about taking action, then giving time for reflection. Doing, and being. We swim, then we float.

Balance –between conformity and reaction. We live in a world of questioning: there is lack of trust in how things really are. But we can only live in this world –the question then is how far do we join in, or do we move away from what we perceive to be the mainstream? Joining in, or moving away, has characterised our dissenting religious tradition for hundreds of years. We are Excentric. EX’as in outside. We are outside the centre, balancing how to fit in while living up to our own values.

Balance –between our personal beliefs, and the other beliefs in the community to which we belong –our working community, or our spiritual gatherings.

Personally, I see differences between belief and individual experience. I often feel that I believe’can form a blockage: we identify strongly with an individual belief, and as is the nature of human beings, it can be a defence –I am THIS and I am not THAT. Conversely, experience, to me, behaves like a coffee-percolator. The effect of the coffee grains/the life experience, filters through everything, but an over insistent belief might satisfy the mind, bolster our identity, but it may remain unhelpfully long!

We also seek a balance between following a leader, while also grasping and offering our own ideas beyond their box. As I see it, we all have boxes which we inhabit for a time and then discard. After our weekly talk, here, we pass around the microphone to respond to one person’s offered talk. It’s our attempt at democracy. In this way, we build up each other’s confidence –to be heard –to listen –to be valued –and to belong.

I don’t expect to return to following Ramadhan, but I sense that its outer form has helped me inwardly, as all challenges do. Something of it has percolated through me. And I trust that I have retained its flavour, in how I live.

And may it be so.