



2020

# Introduction

This is the collection of my reflections (originally published as [blogs on Medium](#)) as I engaged in The Human Cohesion Project during Ramadan in 2020. It is important to state the context that inspired this exploration. The world was in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic and I was safely ensconced at home in Mumbai, India, amidst a severe lockdown. While the world as we knew it was gone, I had the privilege of safety, health and intention to embark on this exploration of my relationship with Islam.

In my work as a peacebuilder, religion naturally comes up as a hotbed of conflict. The narrative in living memory often tends to be against Islam, given the unfortunate linkage with terrorism that media and the popular conversations continue to underline. Of course, terrorism has occurred and continues to occur in various other religious contexts; but we seem to collectively latch onto Islam as a scapegoat. As I stepped into The Human Potential Project, the intention was to confront this unfairness through self-work.

What you will read in this collection is a series of blogs that are personal reflections as I navigated through Ramadan in 2020. Do I necessarily agree now with what I had written then? Hopefully not. Consistency of thoughts, beliefs, opinions, habits, comes in the way of evolution. So, I sincerely hope I am inconsistent on those fronts and am evolving. I hope I am in the process of deepening and transforming what you read here.

And if you choose to continue reading, I hope what you read triggers a personal exploration for you: of your relationship with faith, and of your engagement with the world as its citizen. This project is not intended to give anyone answers. If anything, it is meant to stir up questions. Questions, after all, are our pathways to consciousness.

Rukmini Iyer

13 Apr 2021

## 23 Apr 2020

Call this a challenge, a portal, blasphemy, or what you will — I extend this as an invitation. We are perhaps witnessing, and living, the biggest social cohesion opportunity of our life, facilitated by physical distancing. Through my peacebuilding lens, I see Ramadan this year as a wonderful space in time to connect with the ideal of fraternity.

Some of you, over the years, have asked me about how you could be part of a peace process: here's an opportunity we can create for ourselves. Regardless of the religion/faith you do or do not connect with, will you summon the courage to celebrate Ramadan in spirit, AND in action? As a world, we have, at least in the last few decades, conveniently projected our conflicts onto Islam and in the process, not looked into the mirror, to notice what aspects of ourselves we condemn as 'terrorists'. Here's an opportunity to heal ourselves, and heal the world, should you have the courage to openly engage with this. At the heart of Islam (and perhaps other religions too), is the ideal of fraternity. It stands for the collective journey we are part of — brought rather starkly into focus through Covid-19. Islam evolved in the deserts where caravans journeyed, each with varied individual lives, bound together by the landscape that brought alive their need for each other. Much like the lives we are living now, a spiritual desert, aching for the oasis of consciousness: each of us facing our own challenges in isolation, united by the regenerating landscape that tells us how connected we are. Are you ready to regenerate your relationship with Islam (and to remember, that the word means peace)?

So here's an invitation to participate in Ramadan, from today until around May 23, when Eid is expected. While you may choose your own rituals/actions, here are a few suggestions:

- Spend a few moments each day, reflecting on how you have lived the value of fraternity that day
- If you have someone in your neighbourhood fasting during this period, offer to make them a simple iftar meal (don't forget physical distancing in the process!)
- Anchor yourself in a ritual that allows you to connect with this process energetically. For example, I am choosing to chant the Shahada 108 times, with the same rosary I use to chant the Gayatri Mantra, or Hail Mary, or any other sounds whose frequencies help me ground, occasionally.

And very importantly, please voice out what the process brings up for you. I will open up this conversation everyday till Eid. Share your reflections in the comments and let's explore how we can support and hold each other through the process.

Finally, to clarify, this is not a religious project for me. It is a peace project. It is an energy project. It is a spiritual project. As I step in, I hold the intention of welcoming what a collective decision to heal can do to transform the world.

Ramadan Kareem. May the journey summon the generosity of spirit in you.

## 24 April 2020

There have been questions galore, from ones that care, and ones that are curious. And as we continue in solidarity with celebrating Ramadan, and share reflections, I'll seek to respond to some of them here. One of the questions that I received multiple times between yesterday and today was about why am I, whose name shouts out my inherited identity, seeking to connect with Islam. For those not familiar with the Indian caste system, my name identifies me as Hindu Brahmin. Given the India I live in, it is perhaps the second highest privilege one could have in this country (you know, a male Hindu Brahmin is supposed to outrank me 😊). And if an Indian Muslim, or a Dalit were to initiate this project, the backlash they would meet with makes me shudder. With privilege, comes responsibility. I do this because this needs to be done, and know that I am perhaps relatively safer than others who may wish to hold such a conversation.

Another question was about some people being curious about how I connect with the Shahada. I connect with the heart of its message: that there is one ideal, one mystery we all seek (for the sake of a name and language-based species, the words use a proper noun that has come to be associated with a particular religion). The name of the messenger in it, I relate to, as the metaphor of the human, who seeks the ideal, just like I do. I do not perceive the Shahada as a religious chant. I connect with it as a commitment to seek that which is my highest potential. I interpret the meaning much the same way as I would interpret 'Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh' from Judaism or 'Aham Brahmasmi' from the Hindu philosophy. And of course, it was merely an example of how I choose to anchor my Ramadan practice. You can choose any other way to do it too. Coming to the core of today's sharing, I experienced the value of fraternity through multiple conversations today, through me reaching out to some people for support, and some others reaching out to me. And I hope we were all touched by the generosity of life in the process.

- How did you celebrate Ramadan today?
- How did you experience fraternity?
- How is your relationship with Islam budding?

I know a lot of you prefer to share responses with me privately, and I understand if you feel concerned for your security in voicing out on a public platform. At the same time, I do invite you to care enough for your own voice, to strive to put it out here. I completely honour whatever choice you make.

Ramadan Kareem.

## 25 April 2020

*“Out beyond the ideas of right-doing and wrongdoing, there is a field I will meet you there.”*

— Rumi

I connected deeply with the spirit of the Sufi all through today, and particularly when I worked on my reflection and connection with Islam this evening.

The day was long and intense at work, interspersed with a few people reaching out related to this project as well. There were some concerns expressed about me doing this work, in a country with rising Islamophobia aggravated by the lockdown.

As I received the concerns with gratitude, I also got in touch with what seems to be fuelling this work through me. What I connect with is the deep longing for ‘home’, to the source that we really belong from, expressed in myriad forms through our existence, including religion. Somehow along the way, human drama took over and garbed religions in personal stories and in the process, we anthropomorphised the source, the home. And of course, stories have literary tools — protagonists and antagonists. Naturally, in the story of religions, some had to be volunteered to be the villain. In our current space in history, Islam seems to be that scapegoat so that the story continues. And I wonder, are we missing the forest for the tree? Are we perpetuating a story that was merely a means to an end (the source), instead of staying committed to the source?

In one community conversation today, several people spoke about how they feel called to, going forward, ‘be home’ more often. And while it was said to mean stay at home, I also wonder, was it also the unconscious signalling, that we need to ‘be’ home — to become, to live as, the source?

That cue was my gift from today. And it has placed me in restful commitment to connect with the ideal of fraternity, that has been the intention of this project.

- What did you receive today from this journey?
- What is the re-formed relationship with religion? With home?

Ramadan Kareem. May we have the capacity to receive the generosity that life is.

## 26 April 2020

The day, and this project today, brought for me the presence of polarities in the world, as well as the deep longing for fraternity in us as a collective. Fear rules one narrative, and faith, in life, nurtures the other.

I was touched by the vulnerability and longing of people who reached out to me for conversations on this project today. There was disturbance shared about religious prejudices existing in the world, and the personal impact of it, along with personal responsibility in it.

What is personal, is also universal.

When a caterpillar nears the end of its form and enters the cocoon, it dissolves into an organic soup that is neither caterpillar, nor a butterfly. As a world, we are in this organic soup right now, where the world as we knew it is no more, and the new is not yet born. In the cocoon, imaginal cells, hitherto dormant in the caterpillar, activate and begin to form the new organism. They operate initially as single-celled, independent beings, that are attacked by the immune system of the erstwhile caterpillar, while its old memory patterns are still alive. We are experiencing this too, as our fears come up to the surface and we project them onto anything that disturbs our memory of the world as we knew it.

However, the imaginal cells respond to call of life, and continue to persist, till they form an eco-system where they begin to 'network' — to communicate with each other and go on to form a butterfly. In nature, this process is not resisted, and transformation created beauty seamlessly. In the human form, we have the freewill to perpetuate our prejudices and prolong the cocoon, merely to keep the fear alive, for that is perhaps the only living memory of the past. And the same freewill can be redirected to re-purpose the memory of the past to birth the collective butterfly too.

As you connect with the spirit and practice of fraternity today,

- What do you connect with as your memories that attack the imaginal cells that are activating in you?
- What do your imaginal cells wish to create?
- How do you choose to nurture them, so they may fraternize with each other within you?

Ramadan Kareem. May you find in you, the generosity to converse with your fears, to honour their longing for your life.

## 27 April 2020

What are the questions you are asking yourself, and others, these days?

Today, I was touched by someone sharing a story about how they fasted in solidarity with their Muslim staff member. The person mentioned that they would not have usually liked to talk about something like this, but that given what we are collectively experiencing, sharing it was essential, and they hope the story inspired someone. I was, and I honour their generosity and fraternity.

I was also asked about why I wish to take on a 'religious project' when there are apparently so many differences between religions, particularly between the Hindu and Islamic ideologies in the Indian context where I live. I must of course, reiterate what I stated on the first day of this project, that this is not a religious project for me. It is a peace project.

Having said that, I understand that the apparent conflict comes from what questions we hold about religion, about 'our' religion and about the 'other' religion. If our questions are about what the differences are, those are the answers we will find. Very often, not only in the context of religion but in general, we think we are asking a question just by virtue of using language in a certain construction. However, more often than not, we have only, rather cleverly, manipulated words to sound like a question, where what we seek is not answers, but validation of what we already believe. A real question needs deeper investigation into our motives. Unfortunately, it is not something we are trained for in our knowledge and skill-based education systems. To ask questions, we need to seek to know ourselves.

In many ways, a lot of spiritual practices, including fasts, are meant to facilitate this — they are designed in a manner that we withdraw from the world and converse with ourselves. The questions that emerge from those conversations are curious inquiries about life and our purpose, not about proving our view point, which is as ephemeral as our bodies are (and just as prone to be devastated by an invisible virus).

So, what questions are you gestating?

Ramadan Kareem. May you experience spaciousness to meet all of you, within.

## 28 April 2020

Over the last three days, I have had three different people (all in India) share with me their disturbance about having heard their dear ones say that they'd like to stop buying supplies from a Muslim shopkeeper. Of course, the decision had nothing to do with the quality or price of supplies, but with the religion of the seller.

Identities as a source of conflict is something only our species is capable of. What is stored as a prejudice evokes a feeling of disgust for the 'other' and the feeling conveniently masks a need for safety. So what is it that we are seeking to be safe from, in the attempt to push away the other?

I am reminded of a story from Hindu mythology, of Shiva and Sati, representations of the masculine and feminine principles. In the story, Sati, in protest of her family mistreating her partner, immolates herself. Shocked, Shiva carries around her dead carcass for a long time, avenging the world in grief. Eventually, Vishnu, the generative masculine principle, has to intervene and fire an arrow that chops and scatters away the carcass. In places where they land, the dead body parts create powerful energy vortices, called Shaktipeeths. There are 52 of them identified across India.

The safety we seem to be seeking is perhaps, from our own grief — the grief of opportunities gone by, the grief of lacking courage to follow our own heart, the grief of a world we botched up... And the opportunity here is perhaps to call forth our own generative masculine, to scatter away the carcass of grief, so they may generate the force needed to rebuild a civilization. Grief, ultimately, is when we believe that love has nowhere to go. If we give it a direction, a purpose, grief can create beauty, art and abundance. I do wish we collectively have the courage to examine our prejudices and touch the grief that may be buried deep within them.

- What are you grieving currently?
- How could honour your grief? How could it serve the world?

Ramadan Kareem. May you find the generosity of heart to investigate your prejudices.



## 29 April 2020

*“The meaning of qurbani (religious practice of sacrificing animals) is to sacrifice something which is close to you...”*

— Irrfan Khan

[Irrfan Khan](#), actor, passed away today. I remember this quote by him in 2016, and it had invited the ire of clerics who thought he encroached into their territory. It had made me wonder then, why a curious invitation to explore the real meaning of religious practices instead of following rituals mindlessly, made the clerics insecure about their position. Was it because their position in the religious order was based on mindlessness of their flock? If people did indeed develop a personal relationship with God/soul/higher power/energy, they would not need intermediaries and institutions as brokers. Perhaps, their ire was the fear of a system not wanting to collapse, disguised.

The term ‘sacrifice’, used in a lot of religious contexts around the world, comes from the Latin ‘sacer’, meaning holy. Traditionally, the word meant ‘to make sacred/holy’. In the spirit of the term, when one sacrificed something (such as a day’s meal), they submitted it to a higher cause, thus making it holy, allowing it to transcend their limited self (personality). As religions became institutionalized, sacrifices began to be standardized so that masses that followed it could be identified as belonging to a particular religion. Notice how businesses adopt much the same kind of practices? Perhaps they learnt about scaling up from religions.

As we witness the breakdown of scale in the times of the lockdown, we are noticing a renewed localization of economies. And I hope, it also inspires us to localize faith: to form a real, unbrokered relationship with what we consider the life force. And then, from there, live the value of fraternity by sharing what comes from the highest aspects of ourselves.

- What is your personal relationship with faith?
- If you were to break from the chains of organised religion, how would you relate to the core of Islam? How will that heal you, and the world?

Ramadan Kareem.

## 30 April 2020

As I chanted the Shahada today, the image of one of my plants I had written about yesterday came to my mind. It's a creeper that, true to its nature, tenaciously grows towards the sun, no matter what.

*Lā 'illāha 'illā Allah* — I bear witness that you are my guiding light, that I grow towards.

*Muhammadun Rasūl Allah* — I, an individual life form with a name given by my culture (Mohammed, creeper, lion...), serve only you, my sun. I exist as your messenger, one that conveys your existence.

As the creeper spoke to me through the chant, I remembered how each one of us is given the gift of the sun, our centre, our purpose. Our freewill allows us to choicefully journey towards that centre. The Gayatri mantra in Hinduism is a similar reminder. So is Psalm 23 in the Bible. And the Green Tara mantra in Buddhism.

Perhaps, religion was meant to be studied through the lens of nature, not through culture. Just as a plant grows committedly towards the sun. Or as an animal kills only when it is hungry, determined to survive. Nature lives the true meaning of religion (*religare* in Latin means to bind, to unite). It connects life to itself through practical action of the plant or the animal. Can we command our freewill to understand this?

Ramadan Kareem. May your freewill have the generosity to listen to your true nature.

# 1 May 2020

A long, beautiful day at work brought together a few strangers scattered across the world. There were no questions about the eclectic nature of the group, no hesitation about sharing deeply personal insights and questions with strangers. Each person there came in bearing the gift of trust in our shared humanity, and together we explored our potential to co-create a new myth for the planet. It was simple.

As I chanted the Shahada, the understanding of simplicity deepened further. All I need to be, is an embodiment of the source — to strive to as closely mirror the ‘home’ we all come from, as humanly possible. And perhaps, each religion, including Islam, originally meant to convey just that: the mandate for our species.

Somewhere along the way, we overlaid religions with culture and got lost in the outer garb instead of deepening into the inner truth of them. And even as I grieve that loss, I am also present to the potential of reconnection. If a group of strangers who came together could do that in two hours today, imagine what we can do with mindful engagement with each other.

- What are you grieving?
- What are you seeing the possibility for?
- What are you becoming?

Ramadan Kareem. May you receive the gift of simplicity that life offers in its very design.

## 2 May 2020

A friend directed me to [this lovely article by Dr Rakhshanda Jalil](#), which, aside from being a delight to an Urdu poetry lover like me, reinforced the awareness of a disturbance among a lot of Muslims in the subcontinent I live in. I quote from Dr. Jalil's article:

*"Looking back, I am unable to pinpoint the exact age when Ramzan became Ramadan and Khuda Hafiz morphed into Allah Hafiz or, for that matter, when people began to greet each other with 'Ramadan Kareem'. I suspect it may have gradually started with the growing Saudi influence and the robust petro-dollars sent back home by expatriate South Asians from the mid-80s onwards."*

As a non-practitioner, I do not have a religious response on this. But as someone coming from this part of the world (India), I notice a somatic response in me every time I hear this conversation pop up.

Personally, I find resonance in 'Ramadan Kareem' as, for me, the term invokes the spirit of generosity in us, that can be so healing and nourishing. At the same time, as someone born into a former British colony, I sense the ancestral trauma that stirs up when people talk of the transition from 'Ramazan Mubarak' to 'Ramadan Kareem' as a greeting in this region: the Arabization of customs is naturally perceived as cultural colonization, riding on the tail of domination of natural resources that move the world (well, at least moved the pre-Covid world, through fossil fuel).

In a subcontinent that was left slashed into being a perpetual conflict zone as an aftermath of colonization, it is natural to be troubled by the thought of another type of colonization creeping in. I am present to my grief around how we have lost direct access to the core of a beautiful religion, because, like every other religion, it has to now be accessed through the veils of politics and economics that shroud it.

- How is your access to religion?
- How do you work with the colonization of your mind?

Ramadan Kareem. May our hearts open up to the needs of our colonizers, even as we uphold our sovereignty.

## 3 May 2020

I was asked today about what draws me, as a non-Muslim, to work on this project. My mind did not quite have a response to that. My body did. Would my eye be bothered if my hand is hurting? Perhaps not, initially. But if the wound festers and starts to impact the rest of my body, the eye would be affected too. And the heart that keeps me alive definitely aches for every little wound.

I do not practice any religion. I have explored several, because of an interest in the philosophy that is embodied in them. What I have deeply come to trust is the connectedness in us all as one living, breathing organism — including all the species on the planet and the planet itself. I am certain the metaphor extends to all of existence, but my puny human brain can barely grapple the extent of this planet. In this organism, where we are all organs, would we be concerned if there is an unhealed part of us? What would we be willing to do to keep ourselves whole and healthy? Would we vilify and abuse an organ for hurting, or would we feel its pain and compassionately tend to it? It's pretty much the same process for me, with the wounds of religion that we need to tend to for humanity.

- What are you tending to, in yourself?
- What are you tending to, for humanity?

Ramadan Kareem. May our hearts burst open with compassion for our own humanity.

## 4 May 2020

After separate conversations with three friends, two of them hailing from North African countries and one from Eastern Europe, each born into Muslim families, I was quite struck by their experiences. All of them reported how at some points in their life, they were not considered 'Muslim enough', as compared to the contexts and countries they happened to be visiting/temporarily living in. And each of them also shared their scarred relationship with their religion given the experiences it brought them, as well as the healing that came through it.

Interestingly, the scarring in each of these cases seemed to happen due to the cultural and personal interpretation of religion by some individuals. The healing seemed to come through when there was a direct connection with the idea of God/power. Isn't that true of all religions? The relationship with religions seemed to be marred when it is brokered by cultural, national, political and other factors. One receives solace and hope when the relationship is personal and reflective. May be religion was meant to be that: a very personal pathway, with the community around it only for others to share how they have walked that path, for inspiration, not as diktats.

It is when some communities/ countries/ institutions hijack the definition of a religion and deem others as being 'not enough' of that religion, that we create rifts between people and their religion, and then it becomes a weapon. Hopefully, contemplative rituals, such as fasting, still allow for space to defuse the weapon and forge a healed relationship.

- How are you healing your relationship with religion?
- What are the spaces you need to reclaim your power from, to have a personal relationship with your own humanity?

Ramadan Kareem. May the days ahead gift back the power we had given away to institutions around us, to be healed and repurposed within us.

## 5 May 2020

A dear sister from Pakistan and I connected in shared grief, over the passing of someone who embodied being humane. And then, it was time for prayer. And we joined in prayer, in our own spaces, divided by an imaginary border between our countries, united by our staunch belief in our humanity. That connection was the gift of life today, to us.

One of my favourite verses by the Late Harivanshrai Bachchan is this one:

मुसलमान औ हिन्दू है दो, एक, मगर, उनका प्याला,  
एक, मगर, उनका मदिरालय, एक, मगर, उनकी हाला,  
दोनों रहते एक न जब तक मस्जिद मन्दिर में जाते,  
बैर बढ़ाते मस्जिद मन्दिर मेल कराती मधुशाला!

Here's a transliteration:

*Musalmaan aur Hindu hain do, ek magar unka pyala*  
*Ek magar unka madiralaya, ek magar unki haala*  
*Dono rehte ek na jab tak mandir masjid me jaate*  
*Bair badhate mandir masjid, mel karati madhushala*

The poet uses the metaphor of liquor to represent life, all through the book [Madhushala](#), that is a treasure trove of beautiful verses. In this verse that I quoted, he speaks of how Muslims and Hindus (in the Indian context), are divided by religion, but drink of the same cup of life. He goes on to talk of how, when they are divided in consciousness, they visit their separate places of worship. When they find unity within, life brings them together.

- What divisions are you grieving?
- What unions are you celebrating?

Ramadan Kareem. May life fill your cup from its bottomless decanter of generosity.

## 6 May 2020

*"In my soul, there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church that dissolve, that dissolve in God."*

— *Rabia Al Basri*

It was a day of contradictions for me. There was deep silence within, even as I noticed a lot of noise around. And life seemed to thrive in the paradox. Or perhaps, I am learning to thrive in the paradox that life is. I am learning to see opportunities for cohesion in isolation, for flow in containment, for vision in invisibility.

[This musical adaptation](#) of the Punjabi Sufi poet Baba Bulleh Shah's verses harmonised the day for me. Even if you do not understand the words, the music might speak to your heart in the language of the soul.

- What are the paradoxes you are dancing between?
- What song is getting harmonised within you?

Ramadan Kareem. May you open up to harmonising all the voices you hold, into the music of your soul.



## 7 May 2020

We are half-way through the Ramadan, and it is the full moon of [Vesak](#) today. It is such a beautiful meeting of two pathways to source: Islam walks the path of fraternity, and Buddhism walks the path of introspection. One reaches out, one reaches within. And they meet in the junction of the universal heart.

It is said that Buddhism met Islam, historically, on the Silk Route in Inner Asia — a vast tract of the planet spanning from Mongol Iran to Afghanistan. In Mongol Iran, the interactions led to beautiful cultural infusions including representations of Prophet Mohammed in an imitation of Buddhist visual art, and the adoption of the Buddhist idea of cyclicity of life and rebirth by the Sufis.

And much as the politicization of both religions places them in conflict with each other, the gorgeous full moon reminds us of how the paths merge, of how the Buddha journeyed towards Allah, the one home that we all come from.

What pathways are meeting in you today?

Ramadan Kareem. May life unite our journeys in joyous encounters with ourselves, and with each other.

## 8 May 2020

Shabbat Shalom! As I listen to [my favourite version of Shalom Aleichem](#) (Idan Yaniv!) playing on a loop in the background, my thoughts go to Father Abraham. Rather, they go to the collective memory we hold of him, all our subjective versions, that spun off a tizzy of transgenerational trauma that we and our planet have been reeling with for millennia.

In his personal quest to understand the idea of God, Abraham/Ibrahim is often spoken of as a *hernif* — as someone who knows the oneness that God represents. And yet, in his aftermath followed interpretations of his subjective experience of life, creating various Abrahmic faiths. If there is one lesson for us as humanity in this process, it is this: it is paramount that each individual is allowed a personal experience of God, for it is indeed a subjective journey — each of our starting points are different. When we try to prototype one individual's experience and attempt to replicate it for the masses without regard to their personal narrative, there is no spaciousness for exploration. Institutionalising religion is inherently a violent process, for it does not account for a personal, direct connection with the oneness that connects us all.

What might heal our collective trauma is perhaps a sense of community, that holds each individual spaciously as we engage with our connectedness in a manner and pace that works for us.

How did you connect with oneness today?

Ramadan Kareem. May life gift you with spaciousness, and a longing for oneness to fill it with.

## 9 May 2020

I was heartened today to see a picture on social media (though I am unsure if it was clicked to be shared, so not putting it up here). The picture had an Indian Muslim policeman offering his afternoon prayers on the road, in the sun, while on duty. Another policeman, presumably not Muslim, was holding up a piece of cloth over the first man's head to provide shade from the hot sun while his colleague prayed. That photograph, for me, was an embodiment of fraternity.

The intention of this project has been to aspire for the ideal of fraternity and to allow it to enter into our being and doing. To me, that is the pathway of Islam. And while it is as simple as making the choice to provide someone comforting shade from the sun, we also leave a lot of opportunities for fraternity unused. It is offered to us moment to moment by life: in the way we water our plants (fraternity, after all, is agnostic of species), through the dog we pass by on the road that perhaps wants a kind gaze, to the tired person who would really appreciate a seat on crowded public transport. The ideal is always present. Are we?

How are you strengthening your embodiment of fraternity?

Ramadan Kareem. May life gift you the wealth of a kind gaze from a stranger.

## 10 May 2020

Aminah bint Wahb, the mother of prophet Mohammed, has been on my mind today. Widowed while being a few weeks into her pregnancy, she went on to deliver her son, only to give him up as a baby, to the desert. As was the tradition in those times, babies of her class of families used to be sent into the desert so that they are exposed to the rigours of nature and learn discipline and resilience early in life. She lived the prime of her life as a single mother, devoid of her child. He was brought back to her when he was around five. They reunited only for a short while though, since she passed away from an illness a couple of years later (around 577 AD).

While the prophet birthed a religion and was celebrated, she birthed the prophet and merged into oblivion. Perhaps, her destiny was motherhood. Having fulfilled it, life snuck her back into its womb.

It is strange, that most religions that exist now are fathered by men. I wonder what it might have been like, had they been mothered instead? May be, the womb does not know how to birth one.

What did you mother today?

Ramadan Kareem. May life wash over you with the benevolent mother's gaze.

## 11 May 2020

Ali ibn Abi Talib, often referred to as Imam Ali, is on my mind, after a lovely conversation with a friend on our roles towards ourselves and to humanity in the times we live in. Ali was a cousin and a son-in-law of Prophet Mohammed. There is a story of him in a duel with another warrior, who Ali believes to be unethical. At one point in the duel, Ali is almost victorious and has the opportunity to slay his opponent. When he is about to do that, the opponent, having no other move left, spits on Ali's face. In response, Ali puts his sword back in its sheath and walks away.

The opponent is flabbergasted and wonders why a clear opportunity for victory was forfeited. Ali explains that till the moment he was spat on, he was fighting for God, for the life source he served. The moment he was spat on, he became angry. Had he proceeded to kill his opponent in that moment, the killing would have been an act of personal revenge, not an act of natural justice that he aimed to serve. In the epic poem *Masnavi*, Rumi captures his response beautifully:

*He said, I use my sword the way God's planned*

*Not for my body but by God's command;*

*I am God's lion, not the one of passion*

*— My actions testify to my religion...*

It is that discernment of the warrior that we need to bring into ourselves, and to our world today. As we engage with the idea of justice, particularly in the context of religious conflict, it is important to investigate what we really intend for. If the need for justice comes from a personal narrative and emotions, it is merely revenge that we seek. Natural justice flows as compassion. It does not seek to avenge. It seeks to integrate the 'other'.

What are you working to integrate?

Ramadan Kareem. May we learn to trust in justice that exists naturally, and make ourselves capable of experiencing it.

## 12 May 2020

There's a blankness today as I sit to write. My chanting of the Shahada was quiet, fluid. I continue to be present to the core intention of striving for fraternity through his project. Yet, there is an emptiness around it today.

Perhaps, because I notice the lack of it in the way we have designed, and continue to design our world, far, far away from being fraternal. The thousands that are dying from Covid-19 are dying alone, perhaps frightened, perhaps feeling abandoned. The millions that are in mourning are mourning alone, perhaps subject to the suspicion of their neighbours who want to avoid them, for they might be infected. The contract workers stranded on the roads in India are walking alone, feeling unwanted in the cities they helped build.

I want to trust that none of us want this. And yet, we gift ourselves the convenience of believing that this is the most practical way to work through a pandemic, by discarding relationships that made our lives possible. If there is even a tiny part of us that believes that things will go back to 'normal' once we are mobile again, I wonder what that belief rests on. Do we expect the exiled ones to joyously walk back to us and make our lives work again? If so, we seem to believe in the choicelessness of those we discarded. We are waiting for our slaves to obediently come back, to be our friends and neighbours, our staff, even our family.

Fraternity, sometimes, seems like a far-fetched dream.

Ramadan Kareem. May life help us yearn for what is right, distant as it may be.

## 13 May 2020

A [beautiful Arabic-Spanish medley](#) of the traditional Ritmo de Panaderas nourished my day. The Ritmo de Panaderas (rhythm of the bakers) was a folk beat that originated in north western Spain in olden times, perhaps as a way to liven up monotonous tasks. Somewhere along the way, the beat found its way to the Arab world. In British Palestine, it is said that women would sing the beat in Arabic when visiting their imprisoned husbands, infusing the lyrics with added consonants so as to encode messages to their beloveds, while confusing their colonial jailers who did not understand Arabic too well.

The beat and the hand movements in the melody are representative of the process of kneading the dough for bread. It is the ability of the human spirit to recognise beauty that enables it to find music in the mundane, to create songs of labour. And these beats travel and invoke resonance around the planet because we are united in our fraternal quest to listen to the rhythm of the universe. It is an innate longing that moves us all, right from a baker in Castile and León to an anguished Palestinian woman separated from her beloved, neither of whom may have known of each other's existence. Music is the language of the soul. It travels, even if we do not.

What rhythm are you dancing to, today?

Ramadan Kareem. May we find deep silence in us, to be able to listen to the song of the universe that serenades us all.

# 14 May 2020

[This heartening thread](#) on Twitter made my day today.

**Hemant** @hemantbuch

A muslim colleague asked our hotel if they could give him a snack before he began his fast. They said ok, please come down at 2.30 am. When he went, he found a FULL BUFFET BREAKFAST laid out. The hotel said it was the least they could do. @Accorhotels be proud of Ibis Dublin

11:23 PM · May 9, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

19.2K Retweets 103.5K Likes

**Hemant** @hemantbuch · May 9, 2019  
Replying to @hemantbuch  
He was the only person there. Humanity is still alive amidst all the hatred @Accorhotels

Read the thread [here](#).

The several responses in the thread to the original tweet affirm my faith in this project, that it is worthwhile to strive for fraternity within. And that, more importantly, all of us, around the world naturally long and strive for it in our own ways, even if it is challenging at times.

A terrorist who's willing to risk his life for a cause he believes in, is longing for fraternity, for connection, for a world that will accept him.

A doctor who's on the frontlines dealing with Covid-19, away from her family, is living fraternity, in healing strangers.





Leadership | Transformation | Peacebuilding



A child cooped up at home, throwing tantrums in frustration in the lockdown, is yearning for fraternity in play with friends.

Our prayer perhaps, is not for building fraternity. It is for dissolving barriers within us, that may allow us to access it in a way that serves life.

What did you let go of today?

Ramadan Kareem. May we allow life to chip away all that is unnecessary in us, so the divine within may step out and serve the world.

## 15 May 2020

The pithiness of the Shahada, much like a lot of other spiritual aphorisms, continues to fascinate me. How different life would be, if we remember the gist of it in every moment we live: that there is but one source of us all, and that I am a living proof of that source. If we could remember that, our world could be anchored in our connectedness, and in our power.

And yet, we seem to be so scared of our power, that we bury the connectedness in the garb of religion, corrupt it with a layer of politics and plunge it into war. It feels like a good day to remind ourselves of Marianne Williamson's well-known quote from the book 'A Return to Love':

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

In what form did you claim your power and connectedness today?

Ramadan Kareem. May life gently lure us away from our one-ness, to our Oneness.

## 16 May 2020

An old poem of mine kept coming to mind since this morning. I wondered why, till it dawned that, that was my prayer today: that 'she' — the life force that animates Islam — is delivered from her past.

She trudges along the sand  
Wearing the weight of her history.  
She contains in her womb  
Stories of hurt and harm,  
Tales of rape and rejection,  
Memories of sadness and sorrow.  
Even as her feet move ahead  
Her veil stretches far, far behind  
Stuck on the thorns of history.

She drags her feet  
Holding on to herself.  
Her stories have been her identity,  
Reminding her of who she was.  
Till a moment comes  
When her womb cannot contain them any longer.  
The water breaks  
Pouring emotions into the earth  
And her past is delivered into the sand.

She stands still  
With an empty womb  
In the middle of the desert  
And listens to the silence.  
The barren land  
The scorching sun  
The still air  
Her empty womb  
All wait, for her to claim the moment.  
And she realises: This moment has no history.

This moment has no history.  
It never existed before  
It never will again, in the future.  
This moment offers choices  
And choices gift her power  
To create as she wills.  
She looks at the land, the sun  
She merges into the moment

And picks her trailing veil off the thorns  
To take the next step.

This time, the step is light  
She is empty, but now she owns herself.  
History does not own her.  
And she takes another step  
And another, and forms begin to emerge around her.  
Forms of other women, in their worlds  
Who have emptied their wombs  
And walk only with themselves.

Their steps till the earth  
Their choices plant the seeds  
Their freedom waters the saplings  
And the land grows green.  
Their veils are now wings  
That fly them from one moment to another.  
Some moments bring joy  
Some bring judgement, from their worlds.  
And yet, they know, neither matters.  
There is only choice in the next moment,  
For that moment, has no history.

Amen.

Ramadan Kareem. May you open up to the freedom in this moment.

## 17 May 2020

This lovely gesture energised my day today:

# Lockdown largesse: Mizoram man clears loans of 4 strangers



SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

GUWAHATI, MAY 15, 2020 18:19 IST  
UPDATED: MAY 15, 2020 19:21 IST

SHARE ARTICLE



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### He wanted satisfaction and not publicity, says Aizawl bank's officer

A Mizoram man seeking the satisfaction of helping others has cleared the loans of four strangers who were struggling to repay because of the **COVID-19** lockdown.

The man, said to have undergone the "pangs of bankruptcy once upon a time", wanted no publicity for transferring a total of ₹9,96,365 to State Bank of India's Aizawl branch for closing the loan accounts of the beneficiaries.

Also read: [Lockdown | Mizoram NGO starts doorstep library to beat boredom](#)

Source: [The Hindu](#)

This adds to other beautiful acts of generosity the world has been experiencing in various forms during the pandemic. I'd like to believe that these acts come through our deep sense of connectedness with each other, and not as charity. There are those that are suffering, and the suffering is not personal, it is ours too, merely embodied by some of us. And so is the act of generosity, it is not personal, it is us trying to heal ourselves, just like the body summons up its central immune system to deal with an injury in any of its parts.

There is so much that is hurting our collective body right now: apathy, intolerance, fear, egos, and the smaller disease of a virus. But we also have a vast untapped reservoir of compassion that we can access and direct to the parts that need to heal. Only, we need to make that choice consciously. We need to volunteer ourselves. The Latin *voluntas* points to accessing Will — Divine Will, life acting through us — and being a channel of something beyond ourselves. And we all always have that choice, regardless of identity or privilege.

What did you volunteer for, today?

Ramadan Kareem. May we learn to empty ourselves enough for life to flow through us.

## 18 May 2020

A small community I belong to gathered today. It's a community of dreamers, of those that yearn to live in alignment with the planet. We talked about food, of indigenous lifestyle, of redefining success and development. A six month old baby girl was part of the meeting too. She swung along in a baby carrier with her father who was taking her out for a walk in their village. Occasionally, she cooed her approval of our conversation. Her angelic face anchored our vision.

As I reflect on this conversation, I notice that this future we envisioned did not need a religion. It needed faith. It needed compassion. It needed courage. It needed to be woven around the living, breathing planet that hosts us. All of these are attributes available deep within Islam, and within every other religion we practice today. Only, we seem to have mistaken the building for the temple. The sanctum sanctorum is within us, as we walk into a temple. If we walk in bereft of that, the temple is merely an edifice. We need to reclaim the memory of oneness embedded deep in each one of us, if we are to recreate a world based on fraternity.

What about your inner sanctum did you recover today?

Ramadan Kareem. May we slowly, steadily, unveil the living, breathing mosques we are.

## 19 May 2020

It was suggested to me today on social media, by a person I do not know, that I should stop using my last name. In the Indian context, my last name denotes a certain caste that is historically associated with perpetrating oppression owing to its position in the hierarchy of castes. The person felt that I was, in using my last name, attempting to continue the oppression by asserting my presumably 'higher' position.

I wish it were that simple, that one could heal ancestral trauma by dropping part of a name, or by changing one's name. Muslims around the world are singled out because of their names. If it were so simple, they could adopt religiously ambiguous names and be free of persecution. Jews could have escaped the holocaust by changing names. Unfortunately, that is not so. The path to healing is not dropping our identities, but embracing it. What is in the way, is the way.

The oppressed tend to get programmed to give their power away, even in their attempt to confront the perceived oppressor. In asking me to drop my last name, the person was handing me yet another privilege, absolving me of any responsibility that comes with my inherited identity. The choice I see in the moment is to hand that power back to them, and to invite them into a conversation. Do I hold myself personally responsible for the oppression of other castes? No. Do I hold myself personally responsible for transforming the narrative of my caste? Yes. The responsibility lies with the one more healed, in any relationship.

And so it is with Islam. It is important that Muslims are allowed the space to embrace their identity in any manner they choose to. And it is important that non-Muslims embrace their respective identities too. And notice, that even as we all do this, there is space for all, without having to impose our identities onto one another, or having to create structural violence by disallowing some identities.

Identities dissolve when they are fully embraced. When sugar is kept next to a glass of milk, there is sugar and there is milk. When the sugar is taken in, there is sweet milk. Humanity emerges when we embrace identities.

What part of your identity did you embrace today?

Ramadan Kareem. May we claim all the identities — inherited and chosen — that are yet to dissolve into our humanity.

## 20 May 2020

As Eid draws closer, I experience myself becoming curious about what will we reveal to ourselves, of ourselves. The legend goes that Prophet Mohammed received the Quran as a revelation on *Laylat al-Qadr*, one of the last ten nights of Ramadan, and that became a way of life, a guidance relevant for the times he lived in. According to one of the Islamic calendars, the corresponding date in this year for this night is today — 20 May 2020.

We are at a stage in our collective evolution where we need a renewed path, a new, sustainable way of life that respects the planet and all beings on it. With each of us journeying through the holy month, I wonder what is it that we are opening up to receive as the elixir, the way forward for us individually and collectively. Of course, the first step in the process is to get over what we were, to let the personality crumble.

While a ritual such as the observation of Ramadan is meant to facilitate that, we seem to connect more with the ritual than with the meaning of it in our current times. Hopefully, Covid-19 gave us enough of a pause to reconnect with ourselves in a deeper way.

What aspect of you is crumbling and emptying in preparation for Eid?

Ramadan Kareem. May we learn to see the benevolence of life in the death of the old, and appreciate the pause before the rebirth.



## 21 May 2020

The moon gets ready to play hide-and-seek with the earth tomorrow. As it turns up as a slim sliver of disappearing light today, it seems to extend an invitation to the world: to learn to dissolve gracefully when it is in the presence of the sun without the earth in between (new moon) and to, with equal grace, reflect the glory of the sun when the earth comes between it and the sun (full moon), as a reminder that it is but a reflection of the source that nourishes life in our system. The moon seems to live the *Shahada* in every moment: *Lā 'ilāha 'illā Allah* — that there is but one source that we represent through our existence.

I wish we imbibe that grace in our lives, that we learn to dissolve our egos in humility as life presents us a lesson, and then reflect back the glory of the learning, when the times are dark. All of existence is designed as a mnemonic tool to point us towards growth and evolution, if only we learn to see.

What did you 'see' today?

Ramadan Kareem. May life filter away our narrow sight and funnel in an expansive vision of who we are.

## 22 May 2020

*In pursuit of knowledge,  
every day something is added.  
In the practice of the Tao,  
every day something is dropped.  
— Tao Te Ching, Verse 48*

Among other beautiful connections and communities I was touched by today, was one where we have been collectively sensing into our planetary future. A few thousand of us gather from around the world every fortnight, largely strangers to each other, united in our intention to journey ahead together, consciously.

In this community today, we were working in a small group of four, from Brazil, Switzerland, Austria and India. After a deeply moving connection and visioning exercise, we were in the process of sharing what came up for us. And the last *azaan* for the day began in India. As the call to prayer transmitted from my neighbourhood into my room and through the virtual connection to two other continents, we seamlessly went into silence. Even after it ended, we simply gazed at each other in silence, feeling complete in our sharing without having said much. As we prepared to move back to engage with the larger community, the person from Brazil voiced what all of us felt: "I feel more human now."

And so it is in the practice of Ramadan, and Tao, and every other faith in its essence. We did not have to add anything. We dropped our words, and became more human.

What did you drop today?

Ramadan Kareem. May we drop our identities, to emerge into our humanity.

## 23 May 2020

The *azaan* — call to prayer — has fascinated me for a long while. And while my ears have sometimes been put off by some raspy-voiced muezzins, there is something grounding and centering about a call to prayer. Over the years, my personal relationship with prayer has shifted, from being an invitation to a better self to now being a commitment to live as the prayer, instantaneously.

The community call to prayer therefore intrigued me as the relationship to prayer was always personal. Since I happen to live close to a mosque, I would, in the last month, pause for a few moments every time I heard the azaan and let its intention wash over me. Here's an abridged (I have skipped the repetition of phrases) translation of the azaan:

*God is Great!*

*I bear witness that there is no god except the One God.*

*I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.*

*Hurry to the prayer.*

*Hurry to salvation.*

*God is Great!*

*There is no god except the One God.*

Today, as I heard the call, I connected with what was perhaps the original intention of the community call, back in the deserts where Islam originated. Journeys in the desert could only be done as a community: humans, animals, and shared resources. In that space, it must have been of great solace to be reminded that even as the sun beats down relentlessly on the parched earth, we are part of a magnificent universe (God), of which we experience only one (ours), and that we exist as proof of life (just like Mohammed) that animates everything; so there is an urgency to become (prayer) free of our thoughts of suffering (salvation), knowing we are all one unified life form (one God).

Now that's a call our world as a collective needs to hear today, in the pandemic that has us scattered and lost in a spiritual desert: we need to remember that we are one collective organism on the planet, including the planet; we exist as proof that she (the earth) is generative, and we need to free ourselves of our own personalities, egos, identities, and merge into our collective existence.

The next time you hear the azaan, will you listen to the connectedness with everything around you?

Ramadan Kareem. May life activate, in each of us, the perceptual organ that is our community.

## 24 May 2020

This project began at the beginning of Ramadan as a deep calling, as if a path was invoking a traveler, instead of the traveler looking for a path. I walked along, trusting that I will meet myself along the way. I also invited co-travelers, and we invoked the ideal of fraternity to be our navigator, and the intention of healing our relationship with the path, as our fuel.

In my mind, I thought the path will lead to Eid. My heart however, knew better. It did not ask for a destination. We walked along; some days were an easy trot; some, a bit of a climb. As we approached Eid, I realised, the path was fading. I do not know if I was becoming the path, or the path was becoming me. Perhaps, we consumed each other. And then, there was no need to heal, for nothing was broken. In the journey, it all came together.

Oh yes, our world still needs to heal its relationship with religion. May be one way, is for each of us to deeply and fully, walk with our religion: with Islam, with Hinduism, with Judaism, with Christianity, with Buddhism, with Sikhism, with Shintoism, with atheism, with agnosticism, with capitalism, with science, with faith... when we become the path, they all lead within. The journey is the healing.

The wound we are battling, is in refusing the call of the path, for fear that it consumes us. It is life's wound, of being betrayed by us, that we embody. Yes, path consumes us, but only like the mythical athanor consumes what is fed into it, for alchemical digestion. Eventually, it turns lead into gold.

Eid Mubarak. May we courageously journey into ourselves, and in doing so, heal our world.