

Ramadan and Meaning Making
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Once a month, I go to the Cape for a Minister's Meeting with about 5-7 other Unitarian Universalist ministers. We go around the room and check in with each other. The facilitator for the day gives us a guiding question. Last time I was there it was, "How is it with your soul today?" "How is it with your soul today?"

We go around the room and make meaning with this question. How is it with my soul today? We put words and memory and images around this question until it makes meanings to ourselves and others and we laugh and cry and sing and comfort and celebrate.

I once took a class at Harvard Divinity School called, "The Art of Meaning Making." In this class we explored the concept that human beings are "meaning making machines," that without the capacity to make meaning, we lose all hope, all capacity for living.

What is meaning? I would suggest meaning is the capacity to take what we see, what for us are the facts on the ground, and integrate them into our lives in a way that keeps us alive, whole, good enough. If we cannot do that, if we cannot both find meaning and then make it into something that gives us a central place in the story, we lose our lives in a very important sense.

We all know people who have lost meaning and the ability to make meaning in their lives, for short and long periods. I think most immediately of people who have returned from war or who go through deeply traumatic experiences who cannot integrate these experiences, cannot reconcile them with their understanding of who they are, and they become deeply lost to themselves and others. We often say of people we know go through this: *They have lost their souls.*

If we are meaning making machines, if we need meaning to feel that we are living lives that are worth living, then the metaphor that I find most useful is that the soul is the keeper of our meanings.

There are many perspectives as to what constitutes "soul." Some say that soul is immortal and does not die when the body dies, something that enters our body when we are born and is not dependent on having a body, that goes on to live eternally when we die. Others say there is nothing that remains when the body dies, that we are body, sacred and holy and profound body, but still only body.

Others say that what remains when the body dies is not soul but karma or the complicated patterns of deeds and rhythms we have woven in our lives that leave actions and reactions in their wake that we will reap in lifetimes to come. Others say it is some combination of the above.

Others say that soul is neither that which is immortal or nonexistent but breath itself or our essence or that which animates our lives. Whether it continues when we die or not, whether it is immortal or not is a question I will leave for other scholars.

What has captured my mind, and maybe my soul, is the idea that the soul is that part of our conscious awareness that remembers who we are and to what we belong. It is the keeper of the patterns of our lives. It is our core. And in this core, some scholars have written, we sustain the meaning that animates and gives substance and purpose to our lives.¹

There is a story from Africa that I read the other day. During the last century a caravan of traders had been pushing those the locals they hired as porters hard. Eventually, the porters stopped; efforts to keep going failed; and the traders demanded to know what was wrong.

The Zulu porters explained: "We have been traveling so long and so fast that we need to wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies."²

When I heard this story, it struck me that the soul, in this way of seeing it, is the experience through which know why we are doing what we are doing and to what and whom we belong. What claims you? What is the meaning of your life? Are you caught up with yourself enough to be able to hear the answer? Are you in one place enough, rested enough, for the answer of your soul, in this metaphor, to get through to you?

Meaning requires that we are able to put the pieces of our lives together, to rest, to take a time of sabbath when sabbath is a ritual of both restoring our connection to ourselves and to others. Sabbath, which literally means to rest, allows us to not only refresh ourselves and feel whole but to recognize the whole and holy of which we are a part,³ to feel soulful.

The idea of sabbath comes from the genesis myth when god created the earth and all that lives on it in 6 days and on the 7th day, god rested.

I was reading this part of the bible the other day and it struck me for the first time that when god created all that was good and beautiful and was then tired and needed to rest, it was not only because she had just done the impossible and made life where there was none but because in order to see that she now would never be other than part of this life, that she now was changed irrevocably, that she was part of everything made and therefore was touched and loved and feared and cherished in ways that she could never have before been, and she had to rest, to see what was, to step back but also to step deeply in to all that was and in order to know herself as one with it all.

¹ James B. Ashbrook, "Making Sense of Soul and Sabbath: Brain Processes and the Making of Meaning" *Zygon*, vol. 27, no. 1, March, 1992.

² *Ibid*, 2.

³ *Ibid*, 1-4.

The ritual of sabbath not only means that we take sacred time to stop consuming everything around us and too fast and too often and too much and just let something come to us unbidden. It means too to notice how we are threaded through one another irrevocably, how my soul touches yours and is changed each time we meet and sing and eat together; how my soul changes each time you cry and laugh and hope.

Without ritual and sabbath, time to renew, restore and rediscover our connections to one another, we become lost, our souls become lost, we lose our souls. Meaning making, the process of making connections through remembering and naming and giving purpose to our lives, cannot happen unless we take time to notice and celebrate and listen and clear away the noise that throws a dark cloak over our ability to notice and celebrate and listen.

So many of us take sabbaths through different rituals. We meditate or run or knit or cook or read or even nap at the same time each day. These are all important rituals and needed too to keep us going and rested and connected to self.

But the kind of ritual or sabbath that I would like to explore today is the kind that not only restores us to ourselves but that also restores us to one another, to our connections to each other, our understandings that each part of our lives is linked and tied to each other's. We are part of one another. We need the rest of ritual to notice not only the beauty of this, but the responsibility of this too.

Ramadan is such a ritual. It is a ritual of Islam in which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. This year, it was to begin on Tuesday May 14th and to end on Thursday June 14th. However, the beginning and end are determined by the lunar Islamic calendar – and as the new moon was not sighted in Saudi Arabia on May 15, the start was postponed for another day. This means that the holy month officially began on the evening of Wednesday, May 16.

The "night of power" or "night of decree" is considered the holiest night of the year, as Muslims believe the first revelation of the Koran was sent down to Muhammad on this night.

During this period, Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and engaging in sexual activity. Muslims believe fasting teaches self-restraint, deepens their relationship with God and with each other, and creates a deeper empathy and compassion for the destitute. They believe that fasting opens a space in their souls for God to enter. How does that translate for us?

What would it feel like to create a space in our souls for god to enter? Would it feel like making more room for love, for mystery, for the unknown, for something that we cannot control or predict or prescribe? What do we need to leave more room for in our souls so that we might learn to be more humble, more connected, more aware of who we walk among as fellow human beings, more caught up with our souls?

Muslims also engage in increased prayer and charity, 2 of the 5 pillars of Islam, during Ramadan. A ritual meal is eaten just before sundown each day, and it is eaten usually with

others with great fanfare and celebration. People gather and share food and celebrate the end of this fasting, the beauty of life, food, family, faith, open heartedness, and their history as a people.

A Zulu proverb says, "You cannot see the truth with a stuffed belly." I am not sure you can see the truth with a hungry belly either but perhaps what else the ritual of Ramadan teaches is a way of honoring the moment, slowing down, shushing up the noise of life so that all that lays beneath the clutter we fill life with can show up and be seen. Through resting, regathering, in-gathering, sabbathing together, Ramadan offers a way to remember what one has, how blessed one is and how holy is this life we share together. It gives meaning. It fills the soul and allows the soul to be spoken and heard.

What do you do that reminds you, not only of who you are but where you are, that gives the meaning of your life and your soul room and stillness and time to find you?

I think about the Zulu porters who had been pushed so hard they stopped saying, "We have been traveling so long and so fast that we need to wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies." How long did they rest until they knew their souls had caught up with their bodies, and how did they know? I imagine they felt a sense of peace, of being collected, in one place, whole and holy, that when they looked from one to the other, they recognized each other as fellow travelers on a path that was understood.

I imagine that they knew who they were, and why they were there, that they felt restored to meaning.

To remember, to make meaning, to hear through the clutter, to know one's soul, to see oneself through the patterns of connections with others- requires intentional, tender, cared for spaces and places and rest, ritual and sabbath.

May we learn together what this means and tend it in and through this beloved community. May we all give our souls time to catch up with us on this long journey we are on.

Amen.