

Sermon: “Ramadan and the Art of Rest” (Laurel)

When my dog Henry was a puppy, there was a stage when he would get too tired and need help settling down. But instead of climbing into my lap or being otherwise reasonable, he would scamper around me barking and biting like a tiny feral furry shark. It took me a while to figure out this meant he needed to be forcibly snuggled so he could settle down.

Which is to say, rest is hard. And it helps when we can do it together.

Knowing when we need to rest, actually creating the circumstances for rest, and meeting it with some ease is not an easy task. Overfunctioning gives us such a fleeting sense of control! If we pause, we might miss things! Maybe everything will fall apart!

And this is not a situation entirely of our own making - capitalism values our worth by our productivity. So resting is a paradigm shift, a way of reordering a disordered world.

Rest is the antithesis to productivity. It comes in many forms from physical rest to traveling away from our daily lives, even mastery - doing something that we can effectively complete can be a form of rest from the endlessness of abstract, unfinishable work.

But today we’re talking about Ramadan, which lasts for a month and is celebrated by millions of Muslims every year. And I will say that I have never celebrated Ramadan, so my knowledge comes from academic study, not personal experience. I knew that Ramadan was a season of fasting with shared meals before dawn and after sunset, but I never really understood why. It’s clear from our readings that Ramadan is a season of re-setting, of reorienting from the usual rhythms of life back to what is most important. It is, as our author says, “an abundant act of love.”

Again, the words from Summer Albayati:

“Ramadan is a time of going deeper into a spiritual oasis, like entering a cave for a few hours while I fast from bodily nourishment... It becomes a holy retreat from the mundane, even in the midst of the ordinary.

For thirty days, I fulfill my spiritual needs as if in great hunger for the divine spirit and, hopefully, I emerge from the cave transformed. This holy experience is the healing. This sacred time is an abundant act of love. And this is what I seek each year during this most blessed of months, so I can answer the call of the divine spirit.”

But this is not an easy thing. Rest and reflection can feel like dangerous territory when the hamster wheel of life is keeping deeper truths at bay or we’ve succumbed to this capitalist idea that our worth is dependent on our productivity.

Listening to our children’s story after Colleen sent it to me, I was honestly kind of delighted that the prophet’s response to the angel’s directive to read the Quran was “I am not a reader.” I appreciate that even prophets resist what’s good for them and need to be reminded repeatedly. It’s almost like making room for world building is uncomfortable.

Tricia Hersey, a Black, female activist and creator of a movement called the Nap Ministry, wrote this about rest:

“This is about more than naps. It is not about fluffy pillows, expensive sheets, silk sleep masks or any other external, frivolous, consumerist gimmick. It is about a deep unraveling from white supremacy and capitalism. These two systems are violent and evil. History tells us this and our present living shows this. Rest pushes back and disrupts a system that views human bodies as a tool for production and labor. It is a counter narrative. We know that we are not machines. We are divine.”

Taking time to rest, to realign ourselves with that which is fundamental to our very being, that is no small thing. Ramadan is one way that millions of people all over the world take time for this reorienting towards what is sacred and good and important.

What practices help you to find that space of quiet and clarity? Is it getting up ten minutes early to really sit with your coffee and breathe? Is it coming to church? Is it going for a hike or journaling even just a few sentences?

We live in a world that doesn't want us to rest. And I will be the first to admit that I got pretty twitchy last week when I was on break and had run out of projects to do and hadn't yet conceded that I really just needed a nap - shifting into a place of quiet can be a struggle.

My hope for all of you is that being part of this community helps - like baby Henry in need of those nap time snuggles, I hope that being in this place helps you to settle into a feeling of being held and loved and quieted in community. And if it does, I invite you to share that - bring a friend, tell your neighbor that this place fills your spirit. If Ramadan is any indication, it helps when our rest is held and encouraged by community.

Because imagine what's possible among people who know how to rest.

Amen and blessed be.

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