

The Full Swing of Ramadan:

Well, Ramadan is really something entirely unlike anything I've been a part of before. It's quiet – I mean deathly quiet – during the morning hours on most days in many places. And then the day starts to warm up and get a little busier with traffic and stores opening as the afternoon gets under full sway. But then by the time the sun sets, and the official time for breaking the fast each day begins, the streets are thronged with people. Then, for the rest of the night, we stay awake and drink tea or go out walking with what feels like the rest of Jordan. This continues until about 3:30 AM when the last meal of the night before the fast begins at about 4:30 AM. The time changes a little each day with the official sunrise and sunset. Then we sleep to put as much of the daylight fasting hours behind us before we wake up and experience some of the unpleasant feelings like incredible dehydration and thirst in the midst of a desert. After all, with Ramadan moving 10 days back on the Gregorian calendar each year, this year's Ramadan right in August is both one of the longest and hottest on record in years.

The system is a little different here at the orphanage, like so many other things, because usually families get together in their huge clans and break fast together and then spend the night talking, drinking tea, and smoking before going home in the early morning hours. Here, naturally, our little community goes about things a little differently. We have a single room available to us with air-conditioning, an *incredible luxury*, and we all crowd into this room and spend the night working, talking, watching movies, studying/reading, or just napping unless it's properly cold outside as it's been the last night or two.

Friends and strangers ask, almost without exception, whether you're fasting when they see you. When I explain that I am, the responses I've received vary widely. Some people have immediately expressed confusion bordering on what seems like the beginnings of an outright mental-breakdown when they hear that someone who is not Muslim is fasting like a Muslim. Other people are deeply honored and are openly very appreciative of the gesture. But everyone asks me why I am fasting.

I respect fasting profoundly, most notably how we are compelled to remind ourselves to be grateful for what we have and not for the expectations we have become accustomed to projecting upon the world. And I further explain to those that are curious that I live entirely with Muslims. If I want to show respect to the people I live with, if I want to learn about Islam and what it means to be a follower of this faith, and if I want to limit what are already significant fundamental differences between us, fasting is a quite small but reasonable act to partake in during Ramadan. If they were with me during Christmas in the United States, I'd hope or expect of them to give and receive presents if they were living in a place where that was custom. Even if I did not feel inclined to fast, eating and drinking water during the day hidden away alone in my room (so as not to be in front of people fasting) would make me feel a bit too much like a criminal anyway.

There are Muslims that cheat and eat food, smoke cigarettes, drink water, have sex during the day, etc. and some people have ball-parked the figure from their own experiences and guessing at about 5-10%. But it's unusual, and deeply disrespected if they are Muslim. That said, the sick, elderly, woman on their periods, people traveling, and children are excluded to varying degrees from the expectations of fasting during Ramadan.

Which brings me to one of the more incredible things I've witnessed since being here. There are two brothers who do not ever leave the orphanage as the other boys do – Nader and Na'el – and because I am the only other person who also never leaves the center we have developed a really profound bond. Sometimes they're wild young kids like children anywhere in the world - busy beating each other up, taking each other's things, and just generally being mischievous. But when Ramadan began this year, a profound and noticeable change came over them. Their spiritual and religious identity emerged into a beautiful manifestation of faith. They began to fast, without prompting from others and of their own volition, for the first time in both of their lives.

When I ask how the fast is going they respond confidently, albeit with a slightly parched tongue, that it is no problem at all. They sit down at the table to break fast each night saying how they are not hungry, an assertion that while categorically false is their way of sharing with us their own excitement and commitment to the duty of fasting. They mean for us to know that they are ready, willing, and quite able to become *men* of the Muslim faith who fast and not boys who are excluded from this religious and cultural expectation. It is a right of passage that they asserted they were ready to begin. And even with my more subtle spiritual views, these brothers humble me.

Two evenings ago, when the older boy Nader spontaneously picked up a prayer-mat and began to pray, he pointed his prayer rug about 90 degrees away from the direction of Mecca – where it should have been pointed. I quietly reminded him of the right direction and he silently adjusted, then continued his prayers alone. As he sat, stood, and kneeled in succession, speaking Allah's name and mumbling words from the Quran with undeniable reverence and belief. In that moment, I felt how real God and the spirit within each of us is here and how hollow it so often felt in the US when I was Nader's same age. As I was thinking to myself how remarkable this moment I was, Nader finished praying and went back to the game he had been at five minutes before.