

Neighboring Faith—A Visit from a Friend  
Tuesday vespers online, May 12, 2020

Hymns:

Come, Come, Whoever You Are (words: J. Rumi, a Sufi; tune: L. Ungar, a UU); Go Lifted Up.

Special Music:

Irina on piano: Arabian Dance (P. I. Tchaikovsky), A Tale of Strange Lands (A. Khachaturian)

Mary on violin: (J.S. Bach)

Chalice Lighting by Rev. Lisa Friedman, (#4 in *Lifting Our Voices*)

Chalice Extinguishing by Rev. Elizabeth Selle Jones, #456 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

Closing Prayer by Roger Jones (at end)

Introduction by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Good evening! Of the Six [Sources of our UU tradition](#), #3 says we draw “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” In Religious Education at UUSS, every few years our junior high youth group has a curriculum called Neighboring Faiths, in which they learn about various religious traditions in our area and visit other congregations. What’s enriching for them must be good for the rest of us, so for our service tonight we’re going to meet one of our neighbors and leaders in the local interfaith community.

Our guest is Dr. Anne Kjemtrup, a lay leader at SALAM Center, a regional mosque which is near American River College. Besides being the Arabic word for peace, SALAM is an acronym for Sacramento Area League of Associated Muslims. It’s one of the four largest mosques in this area. SALAM was founded in 1987 as a multi-cultural community, with members from various national backgrounds as well as Muslims who grew up in the US or converted to the faith. There’s not enough time for me to tell you all the community organizations their mosque has sponsored or belongs to in addition to the Interfaith Council. Rev. Lucy and I have attended events at SALAM, including a Ramadan interfaith iftar, a dinner for breaking the daily fast—an evening breakfast, that is.

Dr. Anne Kjemtrup and I were introduced several years ago by a mutual friend, the Rev. Beth Banks at the UU Church of Davis. Over the years Anne has served numerous roles at SALAM, including vice chair, secretary and chair of its board. Now she serves as its parliamentarian. Her husband is on staff as its principal of their program of religious education. Professionally, Anne serves as an epidemiologist for the California Department of Public Health.

Anne’s visit coincides with the Holy Month of Ramadan. We’ll be talking about that in a few minutes. First I want to tell you a few things about Islam and review some of the basics.

[slides: founding of Islam in 600 CE, number of Muslims in world, USA, Germany, Indonesia; the Five Pillars: profession of faith, daily prayer, charitable giving, fasting, pilgrimage]

Reflection by Lindsay Mitchell ([at this link with picture](#)) My Ramadan Experience in the UAE

In 2008, the holy month of Ramadan began September first, only a few weeks after I had arrived in Ras al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates (UAE). I was twenty five years old, and the recession led me abroad to look for work. Ras al Khaimah means “top of the tent” in Arabic which refers to it being the most northern province, or emirate, in the country.

While more developed now, back then there was not much to do in Ras al Khaimah besides go to the mall to get out of the heat and visit the same thirty or so shops over and over again. One perk of living in such an international country, though, was the delicious food from all over the Arab world and South Asia that I got to enjoy everyday.

Expats and immigrants make up about 88% of the population in UAE. Sadly, one’s country or region of origin often determined the kind of job you had in the country. For example, restaurant staff, nurses and nannies were almost always Filipino. Poorer people from South Asia often worked in construction or drove taxis. As an educated westerner, one could pretty accurately predict that I was either in the travel industry or in education.

This meant that, often, expats in the country tended to have a very insular, culturally limited experience. Had I been surrounded by only English- speaking Americans and Brits, my access to authentic cultural and religious events would have been extremely limited. I recall meeting a beautiful flight attendant from England who worked for the local Air Arabia. She’d been living in the country for nearly four years and couldn’t name all seven emirates or have a basic conversation in Arabic. I was embarrassed for her. (SHOW SLIDE)

I feel very fortunate that the teaching job that brought me to the UAE offered me a different, more inclusive experience. I taught Kindergarten for a year in an international school. I will never forget the first day of school when eighteen four-year-olds (only one who knew a few words in English) were dropped off by their nannies. They were screaming, they were crying, they were climbing furniture and they had no idea what I was saying to them.

Though the school was small, we had an interesting group of international teachers. There were teachers from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. There were Western teachers, like me, that had been categorized as “Christian” on our work visas. There were Muslim teachers from the UK, Australia, and Bosnia. During our common break time, I would watch my colleagues unfold their prayer mats in the faculty lounge as the calls of prayer rang out from the many nearby mosques, each muezzin putting his own unique flourish on the melody.

I greatly admired their dedication to their faith, and the daily ritual became a sort of comfort for me. So, when Ramadan was about to begin I decided to join in on the fasting as both a cultural experience and in solidarity with my new friends and colleagues.

In the beginning, it was difficult. I didn’t eat or drink anything from sunrise to sunset. In early September, the temperature was still well above 100 degrees every day and my throat and mouth would get dry and sore from talking all day. I still remember breaking the fast with a date for the first night’s ifar as my friends and I shared food from our home countries.

One day we all crammed into a car to take a road trip. It was late afternoon when another car hit us and sped off. Nobody was injured, and we sat on the grassy area on the side of the highway, trying to get a hold of someone to help us. During the next four hours, dozens and dozens of cars slowed down to look at us (especially me, the blonde), but nobody offered to help.

Finally, a police officer pulled over and spoke to my Syrian colleague to find out what was going on. That officer stayed with us. As the hours passed, it got close to iftar time, the moment you break the fast at sunset. At exactly that moment, he handed each of us a bottle of

water and a dried date wrapped in plastic. We broke the fast together. A moment later, a luxury sedan pulled up next to us. The driver agreed to drive us the hour and a half back to Ras al Khaimah. As a way to thank him, we offered to buy him dinner at a favorite restaurant. But, in the end, he had generously bought all six of us dinner in secret. It turns out, he was a local sheikh and close relative of the Emirati royal family.

Eid-al-Fitr is the holiday at the end of Ramadan. As it approached, I felt lucky to be included in my local friends' preparations. We bought new dresses from the souk and special sweets from local bakeries. My apartment was right next to the grand mosque of Ras al Khaimah. I enjoyed watching the hundreds and hundreds of locals gather to pray together outside, the men in white and the women in black. While I would probably always be seen as an outsider in that country, it felt special to sacrifice and celebrate along with my Muslim neighbors.

### Dialogue between Roger and Anne

Welcome, Anne. Blessings of Ramadan. Tonight, you and your family are 2/3 of the way through this holy month of praying and fasting. What's it like to go more than 12 hours every day without food and water?

You have been a Muslim for how many years? \_\_\_

So you've observed many Ramadan seasons! Is it different now from your early years? Is it hard at the start every year?

What does Ramadan mean for you spiritually?

What does Ramadan mean for the congregation, and the larger community?

Ramadan includes the daily fast. What else is the season about? (giving to the poor, helping refugees, etc.)

In a normal year, without a pandemic, your mosque holds a lot of dinners to break the fast in the evening. Tell us about some of those. Who sponsors them and who attends?

Now you are at home, every night! Right now it's less than an hour away from your iftar tonight. How will you break the fast? [Showing dates, mile, flatbread and honey, other food items..]

Recently I asked you if Ramadan has a similar importance to Muslims as the High Holy Days do for Jews or Easter and Christmas. Is it a time when people come back to the mosque after having drifted away, or is it mainly the people you see all the rest of the year?

What else would you like us to know? Thank you and Ramadan Mubarak!

Joys and Sorrows – in the chat box

Closing Prayer

Now let us join together in taking a breath in deeply and letting it out. And breathe together again.

Now let us open ourselves to the Breath of Life which sustains us all, as I offer this prayer.

O Gentle Spirit, on this quiet evening, hold us in tenderness. In these times of actual physical distance, hold us together in community and solidarity.

O Compassionate One, for the sorrows, concerns and worries that burden us, may we feel the comfort of knowing that we are not alone.  
May we know that we are connected and we are loved.

O Generous Heart of the Universe, for the many blessings of life which we enjoy, and for the enduring beauty of this world we share, may we conclude our day with hearts full of gratitude.

On this night of the holy month of Ramadan, let us extend our good wishes to our neighbors in faith of the Muslim community—to their congregations, their adults and children and youth. Together may all of us extend our good will outward into the whole human family.

On this quiet evening, let us give thanks for the gift of this day and for the promise of morning to come. So may it be. Amen, Salam, Shalom, and blessed be

Benediction

May faith in the Spirit of Life, hope for the community of Earth, and love of the sacred in one another, be ours now and in all the days to come.