

By MARIEL ANDREA VIRIOLA GARDIOLA

“Muslim ka ma’am? (Are you a Muslim?)” is the first question asked by people every time I politely refuse food and explain that I am fasting for Ramadan. At which I usually shake my head and respond “Dili, pero nag Duyog Ramadan ko ‘te / kuya...(No, but I am doing Solidarity Fasting).”

If I am not rushing off to class or work, I usually take the time to explain the details: I first encountered the idea of Duyog Ramadan among our inter-faith groups in Davao and Cotabato, wherein non Muslim groups also hold solidarity fasts along with Muslim brothers and sisters especially at the height of past armed conflicts. I also explain that during this time, I usually keep in mind several intentions for which I offer the fast for that month. Aside from the thousand-fold blessings and the communal spirit of prayerful fasting, it helps strengthen my resolve to get over my “day-to-day tendencies” e.g. lack of mindfulness while working, eating or relating with people, and unhealthy habits. This way, I am really able to pull through to the end of Ramadan.

Whenever non-Muslim friends and acquaintances learn I am on solidarity fast, I get the following reactions: “Ang bait mo naman... (How kind of you)” “Ahhh, maayo na kay mu reduce jud ka ana...(That’s good ‘cause you will really lose weight)” “Weh, kaya mo? Di ko gyud yan kaya bah...(Can you really do it? I definitely can’t...). I just laugh in amusement.

Muslim friends react differently. “Sayang lang ang fasting mo, hindi yan ‘counted’ unless you go ‘Balik Islam’ (people who convert to Islam) (Your efforts will be in vain if you don’t convert to Islam.)” There are more friends who don’t mind whether I convert or not, but are very happy with the fact that I am trying to get to know Islam. They’d give me books about Islam along with special gifts; text me once in a while to check if I’m doing okay; call me every 2:00 in the morning whenever I ask for a ‘wake-up call’ so I’ll be up in time for ‘Suhoor’ (meal before sunrise); and text to inform me when it’s already time for ‘Iftar’ (meal after sunset).

This is only my third time to experience 'Duyog Ramadan' but so far it has been the most challenging and significant. The first one, I was not able to finish, 'cause I caved in to the pressures of work and school demands wherein my health suffered (back in 2009, when affected areas like Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato municipalities such as Pikit and Aleosan were still experiencing the brunt of the MOA-AD debacle of 2008). The second one in 2012, I was able to finish mainly because I had a support group. I was based in Cotabato then and staying in a staff house with Muslim officemates, so it was quite easy as I just had to follow their every move. That was the time when we were doing our rounds with the Bantay Ceasefire in North Cotabato for investigations and visiting camps of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Armed Forces of the Philippines to speak with commanders and verify information regarding some skirmishes in the area that displaced huge numbers of families. That was also the time when the consultations were in full swing for the peace negotiations, so I had a very strong intention upon which my fast was anchored: solidarity with the affected civilian families and praying for the success of the negotiations.

This year, I was in the same situation I was back in 2009 (trying to balance the demands of work and school). But I had very strong intentions, so I made it till the end. These were: offering my prayerful intentions / meditations and fasting for a). strengthening and deepening my relationship with God through daily remembrance and meditation; b). our ailing Mother Earth (fast for the climate); c). that no 'Yolanda-like' calamity would hit our country this year—or if there is, since they say it is the new normal—that we would have learned our lesson and have better ways of dealing with such events; d). that issues of corruption and the peace negotiations in our country would have just and sustainable resolutions; e). that I would have the endurance to do great work in my personal and professional endeavors; and f). praying for just and sustainable resolution to the armed conflict in Palestine and other ongoing conflicts in the world.

But throughout the process of fasting, aside from the physical and spiritual benefits of cleansing the body and the soul, the blessings of Ramadan came in the form of strengthening my practice of the following virtues:

1). Patience. In this world of 'instant' food, communication, and things that are automatically within reach, people's attention spans and ability to delay gratification have shrunk to dangerous levels, causing most to seem to always be caught in a frenzy and be short-tempered. This causes a lot of problems especially with relationships. In terms of results, a lot of things get done immediately but are usually half-baked or out of context. I have caught myself several times falling into this trap at the start of Ramadan and resolved to re-train myself to be more patient, process oriented and fully present at each second, minute, hour, day.

2). Mindfulness. I have learned that we humans have two basic tendencies: a) the day-to-day self (others call it ego, persona, the 'little I') that usually operate on auto pilot and have been formed through the process of conditioning by the different institutions and structures of society; and b) the higher self (others refer to it as the essence self, the 'big I', Imaginal self, et al.) which is the wellspring of goodness, values, creativity etc. Both are there to serve their functions, but when we forget about the higher self and just function on auto pilot all the time, that's when problems arise. The ability to be resilient and transcendent is lost; in extreme cases, we lose a sense of 'Who am I? Why am I here on Earth?' and begin to 'merely exist' following the dictates of society instead of truly living. Ramadan gave me the space to practice mindfulness, in trying to remember to stay pure in thoughts, words, deeds and being a master of all my senses. Mindfulness allows me to be truly discerning in actions, speech and decisions. Mindfulness helps me to be truly aware of myself and my relation and actions towards the 'other.'

3). Compassion. Aside from truly experiencing the pangs of hunger from having only two meals a day, the thought that I am still blessed to have food to look forward to at the end of the day made me more conscious of the needs and trials of our fellow human beings. Experiencing the challenge of dizziness, difficulty in comprehension and sleepiness every day at work and school at the start of Ramadan made me truly acknowledge, smile at and speak with others specially the people in the streets. Even when I don't have much, I still felt the deep need to share whatever I had. We never know what each person is going through.

In the case of beggars, people often dismiss them as part of a syndicate's operation, and would choose to avert their eyes instead of acknowledging their presence. I used to be one of these people who chose to 'see through' them. Now, I see them differently in that the mere fact that they have resorted to that practice speaks a lot about who they are and what they've experienced growing up. Relating with beggars on a personal level does not rob anyone of anything, but it actually helps us remember that we are all the same—spiritual beings having human experiences (suffering, learning, loving, etc). These encounters help us remember that we have that inborn right to dignity no matter our status, as human beings.

4). Forgiveness. Keeping agreements / promises to others, especially ourselves is important to ensure relationships honor and respect people who are involved. However, because each of us comes from different backgrounds, we make choices based on what we know to be 'right' but sometimes turn out to have dire consequences. We fail to keep these agreements. Some are major agreements, some are minor, others are a series of minor agreements that turn into a cycle of broken agreements. In the end, all these broken agreements result to loss of trust and integrity. At times it leads to loss of respect, for others and for ourselves. I have also experienced each of these forms. I have experienced committing broken agreements and I have experienced others' broken agreements with me.

Here are some concrete examples of its dire consequences: 'broken' marriages, corruption in government, aborted business transactions, loss of lives resulting from armed conflict due to unimplemented peace agreements, loss of belief in oneself et al. The key to be able to move forward, learn and rise above these past mistakes is truly forgiveness. This is one of the things I truly appreciate about Ramadan: broken relationships get healed and conflicts get resolved especially during Ramadan.

It is heartbreaking to note, however, that many people still don't respect Ramadan season as a lot of violence and displacement often happen during this period. Case in point: the attack against civilians in Gaza strip as well as recent skirmishes causing death and displacement in conflict or rido affected areas in South or Central Mindanao. In these contexts, it comes as a great challenge to have forgiveness, especially when there is no real and deep understanding as to the roots of conflict as well as no opportunity to dialogue and negotiate, agree on and implement a JUST and lasting solution. More often than not, the situation turns into a vicious cycle of unending violence.

During a post Eidl Fitr celebration organized by Al Qalam Institute and other Muslim organizations in Ateneo de Davao University last July 29, 2014 at the school grounds, I was so touched by the prayer offered by the students for Gaza. They were calling unto Allah to help them be steadfast in their faith and to quell their hearts and minds of any desire for vengeance and harm upon the perpetrators. Instead they prayed for peace and an end to the violence.

Following Islamic tradition, I also made sure to take advantage of this season as a time to let go and forgive others for their mistakes, and to let go and forgive myself for my mistakes that affected others and myself.

Because of these things I have learned to strengthen in myself, I continue to truly appreciate Ramadan. I can relate with my Muslim friends who are actually sad that they have to end the fast and eagerly look forward to the next one.

In order to honor the blessings of Ramadan, I have resolved to continue practicing the virtues of Patience, Mindfulness, Compassion and being Forgiving even beyond this season. Because indeed, in their purest form, Islam and the different religions actually aim to spread universal values. The most articulated of these are: Love of God and love of fellow human beings through

relationships. In trying to imbibe spiritual virtues that help me constantly operate from 'true human essence' I can also share the blessings I've received to others through genuine interactions and my chosen life vocation. — Mariel Andrea "Ayyi" V. Gardiola contributes in MindaViews, the opinion section of MindaNews. She is a student of life, and a traveler. Born and raised in Manila with roots in the Northern Philippines (Bicol and Mindoro) she has the heart of a Mindanawon and considers Davao City (and Mindanao) as her home. Ayyi continues to explore paths to cultural renewal, inner mastery and community service as her means of giving back to the world. Wanting to have a deeper understanding of her experiences in the field, she recently joined the Ateneo de Davao Institute of Anthropology as one of its Masteral students and researchers