

Interreligious Customs

STRENGTH FROM THE SPIRIT ENDURES

BY THE REV. ANNEMARIE E. KALKE DELGADO,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WYOMING INTERFAITH NETWORK

On the popular television show *Grey's Anatomy*, viewers follow a group of surgical interns, residents, and physicians through the challenges of human life while practicing medicine in a highly stressful environment and facing multiple life-or-death decisions every day. For the sake of drama, the show includes multiple ethical decisions in each episode. As I recently watched the show's first few seasons, I wondered what I would have done in similar circumstances. How would I have endured the very real challenges the characters face? What has my life taught me that affects my response? How does my faith play a role in how I deal with and endure life's trials?

I can easily say, without hesitation, that my initial response includes turning to prayer, communicating with and relying on God. But what happens when the answers don't come as quickly or in the ways that I expect? What happens when I am left in a time of waiting, in an extended time of wilderness wandering or wondering? What do I do then? In those times, I believe we must increase our efforts to spend time with the Divine and open our hearts to hear what the Holy Spirit is telling us.

As people of faith, we are called to grow in our relationship with our Creator and to discern spiritual guidance, not just in times of crisis but at all times. Just like strengthening our physical bodies with regular exercise, we must strengthen our spiritual selves with regular practices. There are many spiritual disciplines or practices we can use to help us make it through hard times: prayer, meditation, study, service, confession, worship, fasting, and pilgrimages are a few of the more common ones. Since we have just finished Lent in the Christian calendar, I have been reflecting on the spiritual discipline of fasting. For various reasons, fasting came to mind in a particular way this season as an effective way to spend focused time with God. When fasting as a spiritual practice, we intentionally place our relationship with the Divine above the needs of our bodies so as to strengthen our spiritual selves.

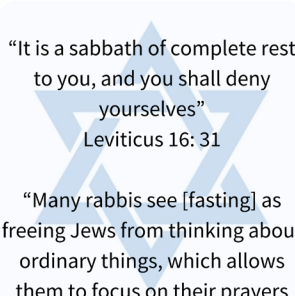
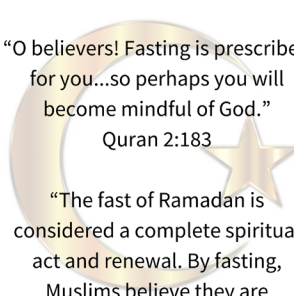
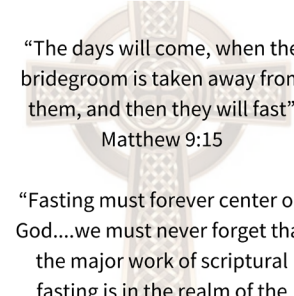
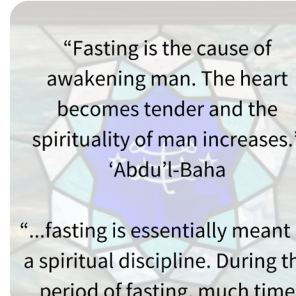
Intention is key to fasting. Author and theology professor Richard Foster advises that "Fasting must forever center on God." If we engage in the practice of fasting with the right intention, then "we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God."¹

"And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward." —Matthew 6:16



In a recent Wyoming Interfaith Network (WIN) meeting, we were doing a check-in, and I noted that several of us, not only the Christians, were engaged in a spiritual discipline of fasting. It struck me as another example of discovering a commonality between faith traditions that has the power to unite us across differences. Indeed, we are all strengthened through shared experience, and our individual fasting experiences helped us connect in a unique way that day.

FASTING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

<u>Jewish</u>	<u>Muslim</u>	<u>Christian</u>	<u>Baha'i</u>
Yom Kippur	Ramadan	Lent	The Fast
 "It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves" Leviticus 16: 31 "Many rabbis see [fasting] as freeing Jews from thinking about ordinary things, which allows them to focus on their prayers and the spiritual energies of the day [Yom Kippur]."	 "O believers! Fasting is prescribed for you...so perhaps you will become mindful of God." Quran 2:183 "The fast of Ramadan is considered a complete spiritual act and renewal. By fasting, Muslims believe they are conforming to God's command..."	 "The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" Matthew 9:15 "Fasting must forever center on God....we must never forget that the major work of scriptural fasting is in the realm of the spirit."	 "Fasting is the cause of awakening man. The heart becomes tender and the spirituality of man increases." 'Abdu'l-Baha "...fasting is essentially meant as a spiritual discipline. During the period of fasting, much time should be given to prayer and meditation..."
Source: Judaism for dummies Rabbi Ted Falcon and David Blatner [John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, 2019] 274	Source: Islam Explained: A Short Introduction Ahmad Rashid Salim [Rockridge Press, Emeryville, 2020] 47	Source: Celebration of Discipline Richard J. Foster [Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1988] 54, 60	Source: The Baha'i Faith: An Introduction Gloria Faizi [Baha'i Literature, New Delhi, 2003] 62

In 2024, the annual celebrations of Christian Lent (February 14-March 30), Muslim Ramadan (March 12-April 9), and the Baha'i Fast (March 2-21) overlapped in a way that doesn't always occur. During these celebrations, the faithful focus on God, on being spiritually renewed and God-conscious. Later in the year, our Jewish friends will celebrate Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, during which "they feel an extraordinary sense of release and spiritual unity that comes with forgiveness."² All of these religious times are enriched by the spiritual practice of fasting.

Knowing that we share this amazing connection, I continued to explore the interreligious aspect of fasting and found an article from 2022, when Ramadan and Lent overlapped for the first time in nearly 30 years. It echoed what I had discovered in my own experience: we can accomplish more together when we find unity through our similarities.

"Ramadan and Lent operate in very different theological frameworks, but there is still deep resemblance between them," said Pallavi Chandak, "Both Muslims and Christians connect increased devotion to God with religious acts of purity and self-sacrificial service. And fasting is placed in a larger context of God's gracious provision, putting an emphasis on charity and reflection during this time of fasting."³

"Sharing about these traditions is a way to emphasize what we have in common – values of empathy, patience, perseverance and compassion, despite our religious differences," said Dr. Tariq Alam, a Mercy neurologist. "We can revisit acceptance and tolerance when we focus on these shared practices."⁴

Since that earlier WIN meeting, Lent has ended; however, I have continued to learn about and reflect upon the shared spiritual practice of fasting. In a later conversation with Katrina Bradley, WIN's board chair and Baha'i representative, I asked if she would share more about the Baha'i Fast and how it helps one endure life's challenges. Her thoughts echo much of what I know as a Christian.

“To endure is to have the strength to keep going, often under difficult circumstances. Among Baha'i spiritual practices, observing the law of fasting serves as a training ground for elements of spiritual endurance such as self-discipline, reflection, and detachment from material desires. Just as building physical endurance requires us to move our muscles in certain ways over time, building spiritual endurance requires that we commit to focusing more deeply on spiritual actions for a period of time. Throughout the annual nineteen day fast, Baha'is abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset, signifying a conscious effort to prioritize spiritual nourishment over physical desires. During this time, Baha'is immerse themselves in prayer, meditation, and acts of service, fostering a deeper communion with the divine. Through the fast, Baha'is not only strengthen their endurance and resilience but also reaffirm their dedication to spiritual growth and collective unity in the pursuit of a more harmonious world.”⁵

The characters of *Grey's Anatomy* are all working to save lives, trying to be the best of the best at what they do. And I don't think any of us really knows how we would endure some of the challenges presented on the show. However, I believe that through the regular practice of spiritual disciplines such as fasting, we increase our endurance to make it through difficult times and improve our resilience in response to such occasions. As we grow closer to the Divine, pursue a more harmonious world, and seek the kingdom of God, we find that we are never alone. We are supported in life by that which connects us to each other and by our faith, which connects us to the Creator.

“As people of faith, we are called to grow in our relationship with our Creator and to discern spiritual guidance, not just in times of crisis but at all times.”

Thank you to Katrina Bradley, Board Chair and Baha'i representative on the Wyoming Interfaith Network board of directors, for her contribution to this article.



WYOMING
INTERFAITH
NETWORK

1 Foster, 55.

2 Falcon, Ted and David Blatner. *Judaism for dummies*. [John Wiley & Sons Inc., Hoboken, 2019] 272.

3 *Mercy Co-workers Celebrate and See Parallels in Ramadan and Lent*, April 2, 2022. Accessed on March 31, 2024 <https://www.mercy.net/newsroom/2022-04-02/mercy-co-workers-celebrate-and-see-similarities-in-ramadan-and-l/>

4 Mercy Co-workers...

5 Bradley, Katrina. From an email dated March 29, 2024, titled “Endurance and the Fast”.