

Submission and Surrender as Spiritual Practices

Readings: 'Towers of Babel' by George A. Tyger
'Different Ways to Pray' by Naomi Shihab Nye
'For a Dying Tomcat Who's Relinquished His Former Hissing and Predatory Nature' by Mary Karr

I sat, shivering in an overly air-conditioned classroom. I had been in Egypt for a week. I had finally adjusted to the time zone difference. I was still adjusting to the heat. I was ready to start taking classes at the American University in Cairo, where I had enrolled for the semester. It was the first day of colloquial Egyptian Arabic language class and I was eager to start understanding the language that surrounded me. My professor started gesturing around the room and saying unfamiliar words. '*Kitab*' he said as he held up a book, then '*kutub*' as he picked up more books. '*Maktab*' he said as he pointed at a desk and '*makatib*' as he pointed at several. He pantomimed writing and said '*aktub*.' As he continued to pantomime writing he quietly started repeating "k-t-b," "k-t-b," "k-t-b" and gestured for us all to repeat the sound and action.

While most of the words and phrases I learned in that class have faded from memory, the memory of that day lingers.

I really enjoy learning languages. I'm not particularly skilled at it, but I work hard, logging time with flashcards and repeating unfamiliar sounds. My favorite part is learning about how another language organizes itself, learning about the great diversity of ways languages can work, stretching my brain to understand unfamiliar patterns. In that class in Cairo, I learned that Arabic and other Semitic languages, like Hebrew and Aramaic, have what are called 'root consonants.' This means that words related to a certain idea contain the same three consonants in the same order, with different vowels between the consonants and sometimes other consonants added around the edges. On that first day of class, we were learning the k-t-b group of words, all of which are related to writing. '*Kitab*' is the Arabic word for 'book.' '*Kutub*' is 'books.' '*Maktab*' is desk and '*makatib*' is desks. '*Aktub*' is 'I write.' The pattern continues through much of the language. As my comprehension grew and I learned more of these patterns, I couldn't always understand what was being said by those around me, but I could sometimes hear familiar root consonants and know that people were talking about something related to writing, or speaking, or helping.

Before this learning, I had idly wondered why we call the followers of Islam Muslims. The two words seemed unrelated to me. Then I learned about root consonants in Arabic and it made sense. Both the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim' share s-l-m as their root consonants. That is how they relate to one another – and we borrowed those Arabic words and added them to English. The s-l-m consonant group is made up of words related to safety, security, peace, and submission. '*Salim*' means whole or unbroken. '*Selema*' means safety. '*Salaam*' means peace. 'Islam' literally means surrender or submission, though with connotations of peacefulness and wholeness that aren't present in those words in English. 'Muslim' means 'one who submits.' These words are related through the Semitic pattern of root consonants, not through the rules

of our English grammar. If you ever wondered about the relationship between the words Islam and Muslim, wonder no more.

Knowing that these two words mean 'submission' or 'surrender' might open up a whole other set of wondering. It does for me. As someone with commitments to justice, especially feminist commitments, I struggle with the idea of submission or surrender being valuable ideas. Surrender seems like defeat. What is good about that? What is spiritual about that? Why would one of the world's major religions name itself that? And submission makes my skin crawl even more – perhaps yours too. I struggle to separate the ideas of submission from hierarchical calls for women to submit to men, wives to submit to husbands, slaves to submit to masters... and yet, nearly two billion people are Muslim, identifying themselves they as 'people who submit,' finding religious meaning in ideas of submission and surrender. Months ago, I set this as our focus in worship today, because I had a sense that there was something here I need to learn, that we might need to learn together. Let us see if that sense was right.

One of the most compelling frameworks for comparative religions that I know is to see that each of the world's wisdom traditions understands the problems of humanity in a different way. To speak in broad generalizations, Christianity sees the problem as sin, Hinduism as the cycle of rebirth, Confucianism as chaos, and so on. Islam says that humanity's problem is that we think we are self-sufficient. We are not self-sufficient; we are wholly dependent on others, on forces and circumstances outside of our control, on God. To a Muslim, any ideas we hold about our own independence are illusions.

This is not a uniquely Muslim teaching. We Unitarian Universalists hold it too. As a community that is not bound together by shared belief, we hold many views about what is most important and about if some sort of God is and how that God might be, but we affirm the idea that we are connected in an interdependent web of all existence. This is a reminder that we, as individuals are not self-sufficient. We as individuals, are not the center of the universe. We don't agree on what is the center of the universe – or even if the center of the universe is a useful metaphor given what we know about cosmology, but we believe that we as individuals do not occupy that central position.

One of my favorite readings in the hymnal is a gentle reminder of this truth. It is by Richard M. Fewkes, a retired white Unitarian Universalist minister who spent his career serving congregations in Massachusetts. Here are his words:

'For the sun and the dawn which we did not create;
For the moon and the evening which we did not make;
For food which we plant but cannot grow;
For friends and loved ones we have not earned and cannot buy;
... For all things which come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves;
... We lift up our hearts in thanks this day.¹

¹ Fewkes, Richard M. 'We Lift Up Our Hearts in Thanks.' *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993. #515

This isn't quite submission and surrender, but it is a remembering that self-sufficiency is an illusion. All of us are wholly dependent on others. Today, if we have eaten, we know that food that grew because of the work of the sun and soil and human hands and human ingenuity. We have traversed roads that we constructed through the actions of others and the funding of all of us. We are in a church community that exists because of the commitment and generosity of thousands of people stretching back to 1855 here in Kalamazoo. The list of the ways we depend on others goes on and on and on.

The story I told our children this morning from Rabbi Simcha Bunim, reminds us we are simultaneously the reason the world was created and nothing more than dust and ashes... The pocket that reminds us that we are dust and ashes calls us toward submission and surrender. It calls us to remember that the world is big and we are small. While we all matter, we simultaneously don't matter *that* much.

Balancing the teachings of the two pockets, the reality that we matter and we don't matter that much is part of the religious life, the life of integrity. Striking the balance between self-importance and self-abnegation is a project that lasts a lifetime and having a spiritual community or a theological framework often makes the work easier. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, psychologist William James writes that religion is one of the ways humanity makes sense and makes meaning out of the submissions and surrenders that life requires of us. He writes,

'When all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent positions of repose. Now in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary; and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute. It becomes an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill.'² That quote is denser than things I typically quote in our services. If you want to linger with it – and I encourage you to— it is also printed in the order of service. Life requires us to submit and surrender. William James argues that religion is how we can make sense of that surrender.

Islam, the religion named for submission, is, in many ways, expert at this component of the religious life. The submission and surrender of Islam, is not a worldly submission of weak or powerless people to strong or powerful ones, but submitting to an all-merciful, all-compassionate, all-powerful God. The submission Islam calls for is orienting one's life by the five pillars of Islam, the five practices central to that wisdom tradition. The faithful giving away a portion of their wealth every year. They make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lives, if they

² James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007. Page 21

are able. They fast during the month of Ramadan every year, if they are able. They say the proclamation of faith – 'I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.' They pray five times a day. All of these practices are reminders of submission, of de-centering oneself, of remembering one's interdependence.

In Islam, prayer involves the whole body – and leaves a mark on the body. The daily prayer involves standing, bowing, sitting, and prostration – kneeling and leaning so far forward that one's forehead touches the ground in front of their knees. It is a hard posture, sometimes painful – and ones that observant Muslims do five times a day, every day. They bow and bend and are not ashamed.

When I lived in Cairo, I noticed that a lot of the older men had discoloration, calluses, or scarring in the middle of their foreheads. I asked a few local friends about it and they told me that it was from prayer – from the men scraping their forehead on the ground, over and over and over again. And then they told me they weren't quite sure it was really from that. They all had stories of people who prayed every day for decades who didn't get scarred like that. They wondered if these men might have been a little rougher with their bodies on purpose to get these outward signs of faithfulness or scraped their heads not during prayer to make themselves look devout. The idea of competitive forehead scarring tickles me – and reminds us that every community has people drawn more toward the outward signals of faith than the inner work of transformation.

Back to the prostration. Religions scholar Karen Armstrong states that Mohammed, the seventh-century Arabian prophet who began the Muslim tradition, taught his followers to pray with their bodies in these posture so they would remember every day that they are submitting to God, and to transforming their lives in accordance with what God requires of them. She writes, 'a *muslim* [is] a man or woman who had made this submission of their entire being to Allah and his demand that human beings behave to one another justice, equity, and compassion. It [is] an attitude expressed in the prostrations of the ritual prayer which Muslims were required to make... [I]t was abhorrent to [the first Muslims] to grovel on the ground like slaves. But the prostrations were designed to counter the hard arrogance and self-sufficiency that was growing apace in Mecca [in the time of Mohammad]. The postures of their bodies would reeducate the Muslims, teaching them to lay aside their pride and selfishness, and recall that before God they were nothing.'³

The postures of prayer serve the same purpose as one of the Rabbi's slips of paper – to remind us of our own insignificance in the grand scheme of things.

Many of us tend toward one of the Rabbi's two pockets, to thinking we are the reason the world was created or to thinking we are only dust and ashes. I invite you today and in the time ahead to metaphorically reach into the other pocket and see what it has to teach you. If you tend toward ideas of self-importance and self-sufficiency, work to remember that you are dust and ashes, perhaps with the slip of paper suggested by the Rabbi, the body positions taught in

³ Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: The Modern Library, 200. Pages 5-6

Islam, the reading in the hymnal or some other practice to remind yourself of our interdependence. You matter – and you matter just as much as many other beings, many other things. If you are one who needs no reminding that you are dust and ashes, how can you claim that the world was created for your sake? How can you know that your precious life is a unique revelation, that you, like all of us, are one more redeemer?

May we know in our hearts and show in our actions that we are not the center of the universe.
May we know in our hearts and show in our actions that we are unique and precious – and that everyone else is too.

May we find ways to celebrate our self-sufficiency and the moments of necessary surrender that come for us all.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.