

Slouching Towards Ramadan

By Daniel Glick



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Today marks the festival of Eid here in Algiers, a day or two after the rest of the Muslim world to the east of us. Last night, the crescent moon rose over North Africa and heralded the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting sacred to Islam. My children and I, temporary residents in Algeria, joined the collective relief with a joyous meal shared with our new Muslim friends. From sunup until sundown for 30 days, we had also abstained from eating and drinking, to show respect for our host country and to better understand the act of self-denial, discipline and faith that plays an annual part in the lives of nearly one-sixth of humanity.

My 18-year old-son Kolya, 14-year-old daughter Zoe and I had arrived in Algeria about a month before Ramadan began so I could begin a four-month stint as a Knight International Journalism Fellow. The kids and I had initially responded cautiously to the idea of living in a Muslim land while our country was at war on Middle Eastern soil. I explained to Zoe that she would have to be more modest in her dress than what she exhibited in our suburban Colorado home. She wanted to know what that might mean. "Dad," she asked, "Will I have to wear a hoodlum?"

Which is to say, our learning curve about all things Muslim and Algerian was pretty steep. But as we settled into our flat, Kolya and Zoe were immediately befriended by a group of adolescent kids anxious to meet their American counterparts and share their world and faith. Because of a brutal period during the 1990s when some 200,000 Algerians were killed in bloody conflict between Islamic fundamentalists and a military-backed government, Algeria had been virtually abandoned by much of the world during its own "war on terrorism" a decade before 9/11. One result of that period of isolation was that most foreign diplomats and businessmen assigned to Algeria were not allowed

to bring their children. Even today, as far as we can tell, Kolya and Zoe are the only American adolescents of two U.S. citizens currently residing in the country.

They are doing their ambassador status proud. It was their idea to observe the Ramadan fast out of solidarity with their new friends. They learned that Ramadan was one of the five pillars of Islam, important because it provided a visceral reminder that many poor people knew hunger every day. It was important because it reminded Muslims to help the poor, another pillar of Islam. Reminded them of their faith and devotion to Allah, their God.

The first morning's call to prayer etched itself in our memories. Anxious as if it were Christmas Day, we awoke before the alarm and ate a pre-dawn breakfast before standing on our balcony to listen. Our flat, in a high-rise building on a hill overlooking the city, sits within earshot of a half-dozen mosques. As the sky brightened to the east, we listened to the droning chorus of "Allahu Akbar" echoing around the city. With that call, we embarked with a billion believers into a voyage through caffeine- and nicotine-starved, low-blood sugar days and animated, feast-filled nights. Each day, the cacophonous city fell so silent at sunset that you could hear the clanking of forks as everybody broke their fast in gluttonous unison.

We joined the rhythms of Ramadan, arising briefly at 4:30 to gobble a pre-emptive pre-dawn snack and tank up on water like camels about to cross the Sahara. After the first few days of gnawing midday hunger and smacking, cotton-mouthed thirst, our bodies fell into step. I knocked off work early to prepare the evening meal of a tomato-based soup called chourba, deep-fried wraps stuffed with meat called bourek, and other dishes for the evening feast, called f'tour. The last half hour was invariably painful, with three cranky American infidels waiting on the balcony for the call to prayer that would free us to eat. When we sat down, it was with a pleasure we rarely experience at the dinner table.

Our Algerian friends appreciated our efforts, but were also baffled. One of Zoe's friends asked me, "If your God doesn't oblige you to fast, why in the world would you do it?" My colleagues at one newspaper at first didn't believe me, until one asked me to show me my tongue in the late afternoon. If you are dehydrated and hungry, I learned, your tongue turns white. I passed the test.

The last day was the worst, as temperatures soared into the 80s and uncertainty flooded the country. The end of Ramadan would only come, we learned, if religious leaders saw the crescent moon rise, and it wasn't clear whether it would be Sunday or Monday. At around 9:00 Sunday evening, the disappointing word was out: Eid would not begin until Tuesday. We stared at each other, deflated, and bucked up for one last day of hot, grouchy privation that ended with our end-of-Ramadan feast last night.

I cannot pretend to have reached any great spiritual awakening by my efforts, much less a conversion. Still, I am glad we did it. I am especially thrilled to know that my kids will take their well-earned glimmer of understanding and go forth to share it with a world that needs to be bathed in it.

This morning, our neighbors have been parading by with plates of freshly-baked sweets, as is the Eid custom. We are glad, like everyone else we know here, that Ramadan is over. Everybody, it seems, is in a good mood again. Sahha Eidik, as they say. Happy Eid.