**A month of philanthropy and personal development**

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Over a billion Muslims around are the world are observing the holy month of Ramadan, a 30-day serenity period which comes along with unprecedented philanthropic work and a 360-degree development.

Muslim communities, here in United States and around the world, mark this month with devotion, civic activities and philanthropic works. I want to extend best wishes to all Muslims a joyful and blessed Ramadan Kareem. May this Ramadan bring you and your loved one’s peace, happiness, good health, and serve as a time of opportunity to come together. May all of you be guided by faith, and shine with his divine blessings.

Ramadan is a month of fasting devoted to remembering the revelation of the Quran to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Ramadan is frequently referred to as the “best of times”. That’s not because we Muslims enjoy fasting but because of the central importance of the Quran to our religion.

Ramadan is a 30-day period of deeply spiritual time of reflection and recommitment and a special time for giving. This is our chance not only be grateful for all the blessings we have been allotted, but an opportunity to give to those who are poor, who are hungry, who are less fortunate and who have no means to break the fast.

I ask all of you to remember the fundamental acceptance of the equality of other religions by not looking to the heavens and to the Gods whom we worship but by looking at the earth and people and family that we are

I like to call it a 360 degree development model – spiritual, social, intellectual and emotional. During the entire month of Ramadan, we engage in fasting from sunrise to sunset to renew our faith and to redirect our thoughts from focusing only on daily activities in order to reflect upon and do things to benefit society and most importantly to help others who are in need. We break the fast in the evening with a meal called the Iftar.

After the 360-degree personal development, here comes the social aspect: philanthropic works and civic engagements.

It would be interesting to note here that Pakistanis spend more in charity than highly developed countries like Canada and United Kingdom. The passion of charity almost gets doubled in the month of Ramadan.

A study by Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy shows that Pakistanis give around Rs 240 billion (more than $2 billion) annually to charity. According to the report, around 98 per cent of people in the country give in one form or another – if not with cash, then in commodities, volunteering and time.

Prophetic saying ‘Give charity, even it is a piece of date,’ encourages even the marginalized segment to engage in philanthropy. This very philanthropic dimension ignites a bright light inside us to celebrate and recognize the civic engagement of our Muslim Community members here in the United States as well as other countries.

In my opinion, civic engagement takes five primary forms:

Individual – being the best one can be and personally responsible for one’s actions

Organizational – contributing to the success of the groups (e.g., business, religion, associations) to which one belongs

Political – participating in those processes that shape the structure and nature of government

Community – collaborating to make the locale and the world in which we live a better place

Social – advocating for justice and equality of treatment and opportunity for all

The members of our Muslim community here in the United States are heavily engaged and involved in activities in each of these areas.

Being a Muslim has taught me many things – but the most important is that the whole purpose of religion is to provide justice and a path to justice for all of us.

That includes animals and nature itself.  According to the Holy Qur’an, God asked “Who will take care of all of my Creation.  The mountains said the task was too great; even the angels declined to take on the challenge.  But then Man jumped up and said ‘We will take care’.  So, we made a contract with God to protect his Creation.”

I have learned as a Muslim to believe in the unity of all creation and that everything and everyone is a reflection of God on earth.  Because of that I have also learned that there are just people and that just people do just things.

I treasure my faith.  My faith firmly believes in equality, dignity, compassion, respect, tolerance, justice and peace for other faiths.

My faith keeps me calm and provides me with a sense of optimism that gives me peace.  With my personal peace, I can work with others of different faiths and different creeds for peace and to build stronger communities.

I ask all of you to remember the fundamental acceptance of the equality of other religions by not looking to the heavens and to the Gods whom we worship but by looking at the earth and people and family that we are. We need to strengthen the bonds that binds us as one family. Our relationship should not be defined by differences but what we can do together by being difference makers.

All of us are indeed doing God’s work. Not the work of your God or the work of my God, but the work of our God – our God as members of the same universal spiritual family.

I urge all Muslims to use this Ramadan period to renew our commitment to 360 degree personal development and increase our involvement in civic activities. Let’s make this Ramadan a life changing period for ourselves and people around us!

May God’s peace be upon you?

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