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Ramadan makes us all stronger

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Ramadan has begun and for the next month, more than 1.5 billion Muslims all over the world will renew their spiritual lives. Muslims will pray more often, perform more good deeds and, perhaps most noticeably to everyone, fast from sunrise to sunset.

Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is symbolic of the need to practice self-control over bodily needs and endeavor to attain piety. That is the main reason that God has prescribed fasting, so you will not only fast from food, drink and sex between married couples during the fasting hours, but also fast from bad habits such as smoking, cursing, lying, gossiping and any other negative thoughts and behavior.

But Ramadan is not just about Muslims giving up things; it is also about taking on things. During this holy observance, Muslims are bound to by their faith to be extra generous, forgiving and compassionate. In this respect, people of all faiths can benefit from Ramadan.

Muslims share a predawn meal called suhoor. The post-fast meal after the sun sets is called iftar. It is customary to invite others to share iftar, especially those who are hungry and needy. This tradition is recognized in our nation's capital since Congress unanimously passed House Resolution 635 in 2007 in honor of the Islamic Holy Month. Similarly, iftar is held at the White House, Capitol Hill and around the world.

Fasting does more than help purify one's body. For instance, fasting makes it easier to control blood sugar in Type II (non-insulin) diabetics. (Diabetics who are insulin-dependent are exempted from fasting, as are young children, pregnant and nursing mothers, women who are menstruating, the infirm and travelers.)

Fasting also can lower blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides and stress. In addition, it can provide relief from irritable bowel syndrome.

Fasting is a way for the body to rid itself of toxins

and dead cells. The body undergoes complete cell turnover every 10 years through a process called apoptosis. Fasting promotes this process and provides the body an opportunity to purge dead cells, which otherwise can be deposited as plaque on the walls of arteries and blood vessels, impeding heart disease and colon cancer.

Ramadan is divided into three parts: mercy, forgiveness and redemption. Muslims believe it is a time when the doors of heaven are open wide, the gates of hell are closed and the devil is chained. During the last 10 days of Ramadan, prayers of Taraweeh (joy of the heart prayer) lead up to the "night of power" (Lailat ul-Qadr), which comes on an odd-numbered night during the last 10 days of the month. That night symbolizes to Muslims when the first verses of the Koran, is "better than 1,000 months," which, if you do the math correctly, will be better than 84 years of life time.

The end of Ramadan is marked by the feast to break the fast, Eid al-Fitr. It is this time when Muslims express thanks for their many blessings, including food and family. The city of New York commemorates Ramadan by lighting the upper floors of the Empire State Building in green on Eid al-Fitr.

To celebrate the breaking of the fast, followers feast on dates. Children are given new clothes and lanterns for the occasion. It is the most joyous time for the youngsters.

Ramadan is a time of spiritual renewal, not unlike Easter season for Christians. It is time to learn about sacrifice and to reflect on how understanding, mutual respect and dialogue lead to unity and peace - two elements the world needs most right now.

Ramadan is an opportunity to get to know your neighbor, co-worker or business associate. So, please do not hesitate to wish them "Happy Ramadan" during this blessed time. It will mean a lot to them while also reinforcing one of the founding principles of the United States: Our differences join us together and make this nation stronger.