

My Ramadan

My first Ramadan, when I was 30 years old and a fairly brand new Muslim was a bit of a disaster. I'd had an eventful year behind me since I'd become a Muslim. I had been an award winning television presenter on MTV Europe and of a youth show in Germany. But my conversion had sparked a negative press campaign in the German media which led to me losing my presenting work almost overnight. My many inward changes had led to my outer world cracking up and falling apart. In retrospect having been stripped of everything I had identified with— my relationship, which ironically had been the introduction to Islam had ceased as well- was a blessing in disguise. Now I could concentrate on what really mattered, my connection with God, learning about the faith, and beginning to reorient my life and most importantly myself.

The evening before my first Ramadan I made the mistake of going out with friends and drinking a glass or two of champagne. The next day I lay in bed with a pounding headache and dehydrated. Finally at 3 in the afternoon I gave up, saying to myself, Ramadan is not for me. May God forgive me. The following year I had landed a new job, hosting a daily cultural program on NBC Europe. Ramadan fell at the same time as the Christmas holidays. In order to have a break we needed to produce twice the amount of programs a day, which meant recording links and voice- overs from morning to night. I thought I would never manage because in between takes I would always drink water. But subhan'Allah God made my mouth water by itself and I was flying through the fasts. Of course it helped that by then I had given up alcohol. Many colleagues complimented me on how radiant and pure I looked. It was actually a wonderful experience. Since then I have fasted every single Ramadan in the last 13 years. In fact I look forward to it although I am slightly worried about the long days coming up. May God give us strength.

During Ramadan for whoever fasts “the gates of hell are closed and the doors of Paradise open”, says a hadith. I have felt this to be true and have sometimes experienced what I call Ramadan miracles. One time I had slipped a disk just before Ramadan. It was painful but the worst was the doctor said I should forget

about my plan to go on Hajj. With intense physiotherapy and prayers my disk was healed without surgery during the month of Ramadan. A surgeon friend attested this to be a healing miracle as it had been a very bad case. Al hamdulillah, I did go on Hajj!

The first day of Ramadan I often have a headache but from the second day onwards it is usually fine and gets easier as time goes on. I don't even feel the hunger much, just slight exhaustion towards the end and I get tired earlier.

Of course work doesn't stop during Ramadan in London so it can be a bit tough when dealing with non- fasting people but that is part of the challenge. I don't socialize or go to movies unnecessarily. Instead I spend more time reading Qur'an or religious books, praying and invoking God. And I try my best to also fast from anger, impatience, gossip or any other negativity.

This year I may participate in the "Fast and Feed" project where Muslims invite homeless people to the mosque to share food and talk about the meaning of Ramadan. And there is usually an iftar with MPs and policy makers I may attend. But what I really enjoy is breaking fast at my Arabic girlfriend's house who often invites ladies round for iftar. This gives me a taste of love and warmth, the celebratory community- spirit of Ramadan, and the sense of sharing which we otherwise miss in the West, especially when without a Muslim family, single and working. One time I was in Egypt the day before Ramadan started. I was moved to tears when I saw thousands of people in the main square near Saydna Hussain looking for the moon and crying out: Ramadan Karim, beautiful moon, where are you. When they saw it, it was like a party. In London we get texts when people have seen the moon but it's more complicated because we usually have three different start dates and three different days when Eid is celebrated, depending on which school one follows. I usually keep in line with the London Central mosque which follows Saudi Arabia. My dream is to experience Ramadan with my own Muslim family and in a Muslim country- of course one day also in Mecca – the good thing is, I am transported to Mecca while having iftar in London because that is just the time when the Tarawiah prayers from the Masjid al haram are transmitted live on TV. . I make it my ritual when home to watch the prayers

while having my iftar. Even in London I feel Ramadan is a very special and blessed time. I believe this annual spiritual discipline is a key to transforming and bettering myself as a human being – of course there is still way to go. I take stock of my life, think about what I want to improve, actively work on forgiving people who may have hurt me and dissolving any resentment in my heart and I pray to God to forgive me. Through fasting in Ramadan I feel closer to God, clearer and more aware, more sensitive. Even my sense of taste is heightened. It is as if I am in a different- higher state. I always want this sensation to last as long as possible but somehow everyday life sets in again after Ramadan is over.

I enjoy the communal Eid prayer tremendously – it is so beautiful and melodic and one very much feels united with the fellow Muslims in faith- in God. And I feel an unparalleled happiness of being strong and being in control of my body and my impulses -- and not the other way around. May this strength we gain from fasting last for the rest of the year.

I have been invited to join Ahmed Mansour on his TV program on Al Jazeera during Ramadan- in Qatar I'm looking forward to that as it one of my dreams come true.