Salman swung open the pantry door and stared inside. Where did Mama hide the cookies? Usually behind the box of flour … He pushed the flour aside and knocked a tin of lentils to the floor. There was a loud clunk and suddenly he was standing in a sea of red lentils.

“Salman!?!?”

He gave what he hoped was his sweetest smile.

Yes Mama?

What in the world are you doing rummaging in the pantry. Didn’t you just have dinner half an hour ago? Two big servings of Lasagna! And here you are in the pantry again.

Just feeling peckish.
I’ll clean up the mess, sorry.

He brushed lentils off his socks and grabbed the broom and dustpan.

Sweetie, you’re always peckish. You need to stop snacking so much. Ramadan is right around the corner.

Ramadan!! A slippery ice cube of fear trickled down Salman’s stomach, and he wished he could have a gummy bear or two. Ramadan! The very thought made him ravenously hungry. Maybe there was some leftover lasagna he could eat when his mother was busy on the phone or something. He remembered last Ramadan. The long days, the waiting, the hollow rumbling feeling in his tummy… Whenever he lay down and tried to sleep, like his parents told him to, all he could think of was food: cream puffs and cheese sticks, cinnamon buns and potato chips. It was a looong month.

“Mama, you know what?

What?

Islam is a good religion overall. I mean, I love dates and figs and olives and all that great stuff. Praying is ok, too. But I can’t understand Ramadan.

Salman, we’ve had this conversation before and you know that …

I know Mama, I know many people are hungry and we should share with them, but…

But what?

It doesn’t really help them if we are hungry. It’s not like we’re donating all our grocery money to the needy. We’re still eating, just at different times, right. We eat all night, instead of all day.

My dear boy, Ramadan is not about staying up all night eating, and sleeping through the day. It’s about eating less, focusing less on food, and it’s not really about food anyway.

It’s not? I thought it was all about food. Not having any and then making up for that by eating even more.

No, sir. Ramadan is about self control.

Is that like a remote control for the tv?

Yeah, except it’s a remote control for your self, so you can examine your habits and actions and improve them.

Cool, I wish I had one. Then I would stop sneaking food.

You do have one, and Ramadan is
your chance to get better at self control.

But why control eating? That’s the hardest thing, ever. Why not something else, like shopping, or watching YouTube videos?

When we are hungry, it helps us to be more aware of our self and all the temptations we face. It may seem like our body is growing weaker by missing meals, but actually our body is doing fine. It’s just moaning and groaning about not getting what it wants. Kind of like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

Mama, honestly I feel like throwing a tantrum each time I think of Ramadan. How will I ever get through it?

You can start by preparing.

Yeah, I was thinking of that too. I think I should start eating a little extra every day. That might help.

Salman! May I remind you that you are not a camel! That’s not how you prepare for the holy month.

Then what do you do?

Don’t tell me you forgot all we learned last year?

No, I remember, you used to make these awesome samosas for iftar and in sahoor, it was pancakes, blueberry pancakes, dripping with syrup.

Salman!! Get your mind off food, child!

But you asked me if I remembered…

If you remembered how the blessed Prophet Muhammad prepared for Ramadan?

Yup, I think so, he ate extra dates … and what else did they eat back then?

He prepared for Ramadan by fasting some days in Shaban, the month right before Ramadan. He started eating less and getting his body ready for Ramadan.

Yikes. Fasting before the month of fasting, but Mama…

I’m not asking you to fast, son. But you could hold off on some of those snacks. If your body is used to eating all the time, it will be very hard.

B … but … I’m a growing boy.

Oh I know that, and growing horizontally more than vertically if you keep eating like this.

Ok, I’ll try to eat a little less, but Mama my mind is always on food. Even if my tummy is full, my taste buds want to snack on something.

You need to get your mind busy with other things. Think about some projects you can do in Ramadan. Sometimes when we are bored, or worried, we start eating instead of fixing what’s bothering us.

Yeah, it’s like the mind is hungry. And did you know there is a term for that. It’s called mind hunger. If you can calm the mind, that hunger will go away.

Now that you mention it, I don’t feel hungry in math class. I love math. Even doing math homework I don’t think about eating. But in science class, I constantly think about what I can eat as soon as I get home. Mrs. Chow is really boring.

Or maybe you need to develop your interest in science. Did you know eating and digesting and even cooking and baking are all scientific processes? There’s a lot going on before that food is on our table ready to eat, and then a lot goes on before we can absorb it and excrete it.

Excrete!! That’s gross.

It would be super gross if that waste material did not come out. How about we find some good videos about digestion, and about healthy eating? Our body needs to do a lot of work to break down and absorb the food we eat. Allah has created such complex systems within our body. It will help you to eat more mindfully, if you know what’s happening inside.

Sure. That sounds pretty interesting. I had another idea! I can help you in the garden to grow food, so in Ramadan, we can give out fresh food to the needy, instead of that canned and packaged stuff.

Wow, I am impressed, Salman. Excellent thinking.

See Mama, having my mind on food is not such a bad thing after all! So … may I have a cookie?

You may have an apple, or better still go pick some sugar snap peas from the garden!
Crossword

Across:
1. The 67th Surah of the Holy Quran
3. The word ‘Islam’ stands for this
5. We attend Jummah prayers on _ _ _ day
9. This was the tribe of prophet Hud (AS) which perished
11. A value cherished in Islam
12. One wife of Prophet Muhammad (SAW)
13. Our Creator
14. One of the mighty Prophets of Allah
15. The spring that Allah brought forth for Hajara and her son Ismael
17. Islamic calendar starts from this acronym
18. The longest Surah of the Holy Quran
20. Compassion

Down:
2. God has this feeling for all of us
3. When we want to talk to God, we do this
4. The festival of Islam
5. She was a daughter of the Prophet (SAW)
6. The Scripture of God sent to Prophet Muhammad (SAW)
7. God asks us not to mix this with falsehood
8. God does this to us if we truly repent our mistakes
10. The Prophet whose name is mentioned most frequently in the Holy Quran
12. The language of the Holy Quran
15. The Arabic letter that comes after ‘ra’
16. Heaven is said to be lying under her feet (short)
19. Soul

Answer on page 12
By Dr. Fatima Z. Rahman

When I was in college, I had a big decision to make! What was I going to do for the rest of my life? For me, it was not very hard to decide. I knew I wanted to be a college or university professor. A professor is a teacher who teaches college and university students. A professor also does research in the field that they are in order to expand the base of knowledge. I am a professor of Political Science, so in addition to teaching Political Science to my students, I also research political behavior.

There were many reasons for why I knew I wanted to be a professor. First of all, my father is a professor and I admire him very much and want to be just like him.

Second, I love the atmosphere of college, and I want to be able to work in the college environment. Third, I love to teach. I love to educate others and I love to talk and discuss ideas. All of these reasons really made the decision easy for me.

I feel incredibly blessed by Allah to be a professor. Teaching is a very fulfilling and wonderful job, and it is a huge part of who I am today. It allows me to help young people. I really like that I can help young adults by educating them and helping them develop intellectually. I feel so fortunate to be in a position where I can have a positive influence in my students’ lives. Part of the job description is mentoring and advising. I get to help students figure out what classes they want to take and what career path they want to choose, and I help them figure out how they can be successful in achieving those goals.

Being a professor definitely works with an Islamic lifestyle. There is flexibility with the working hours, so you can pray when it’s prayer time. You are also working in a very respectful learning environment. You’re also focused on providing education to others, which is something that is emphasized by Allah.

I really do not see any conflicts with my profession and Islam. I think the two go hand-in-hand because of the emphasis that Islam puts on receiving an education. In fact, I believe that as with many other noble professions like medicine, you are helping people in a very direct way.

One of the challenges I have experienced is achieving a work-life balance. There is a huge time commitment to my career, and that can take away time from other important things in life like spending time with family, or finding time to cook healthy meals and exercise. Part of the reason for that is because you don’t have a 9 to 5 schedule as a professor. Class preparation and research are happening all the time, constantly, past those traditional work hours.

Some of you may be thinking of potential career paths for yourself. I want to tell you that you can be anything you want! Allah has created you with the potential of achieving anything you put your heart and mind to. He has instilled in you the potential for having great work ethic, discipline, and patience is what is needed for you to make your dreams come true!

Being a professor is a great career choice because of the many reasons I have discussed above. But there are many other choices that are just as great. Find something that you are passionate about and that you enjoy doing, try your best, and pray to Allah, and insha Allah you will be successful!
Don’t take a photo

Stop, wait, don’t do it,
Don’t take a photo
Don’t use your phone to capture
within a narrow frame
What is vast and open, don’t limit it,
Let your heart take a photo,
Let your mind make the memory
Let all your senses experience the
Here and now
Instead of snapping away for later on
Just be, just see, just feel
This moment in all its fleeting beauty
Don’t lessen the joy of the present
Savor the stillness of time passing slowly
What’s the rush to preserve
What is already preserved?
Our deeds, our words are in the record
Being kept, being saved, being measured
Will we measure up?
Will our good deeds be greater?
Than our efforts to make
Each part of our life picture perfect
Smile and stand tall
Not for the camera,
For life
Dear Ayesha, one of my friends was saying that she did not believe in hell. She says, if God is Loving and Kind, how come He would throw people in Hell and punish them instead of forgiving them. I know the Quran talks about both heaven and hell, and it describes hell as a terrible place. Why is that? I wonder why does not Allah just forgive everyone.

I think the first thing is to understand the true nature of Heaven and Hell. The blessed Prophet Muhammad told us that the afterlife is not something we have ever seen before, or can even imagine, since it is beyond the reach of our senses. So the descriptions given in the Quran are metaphors—meaning they are examples to help us think of what the reality might be like, since we cannot truly understand it in this world. Heaven is described as a peaceful garden and Hell as fire.

When God describes Hell or punishment to us, He is not describing something He does to us that is outside of ourselves, but rather as the consequences or manifestation of our own actions. You can think of it as the bad feeling you get when you do something wrong, but it is much, much worse. Now you might think, why do you have bad feelings at all? They don’t make you feel good and you just want to do what you want to do, and not be bothered with feeling bad! Why isn’t everything candy and rainbows and unicorns? Well, think about it: what if we were unable to feel fire? We would always get burnt. If we never felt the pain that fire causes we might keep sticking our hands in fire and burning our skin and maybe worse.

In the same way if we never had the feeling of doing something bad, or we never felt the unease or worry that bad actions can cause, we would get into deep trouble without even realizing it. In order to achieve forgiveness or to get past the bad consequences of actions we have already done, we need to understand what was bad about them. We need to realize how wrong they were. And we need to repent. That means we need to promise to never do them again. It may seem that if
you’re just forgiven, you’ll move on and won’t do bad things, but human nature isn’t like that. We need a realization that we should do the right thing even if it isn’t the most fun thing.

Also, think about the following: if there were no consequences for your actions, why would anyone try to lead a good life? We would all just do whatever we wanted to do all the time. We may not even stop to consider if our actions hurt someone else. If it felt good to us, we would do it. What keeps us from hurting other people, is that we feel bad when we do it. It is this feeling of remorse, the pricking of our conscience, which is the consequence of our actions, and you can understand what Hell is by thinking of a lifetime of bad feelings coming to life.

On the other hand, the happiness and peace you feel when you do something good transforms into Heaven in the afterlife. In the Quran, God says,

15:45 Surely those who keep their duty are in Gardens and fountains.

15:46 Enter them in peace, secure.

Thinking about death and the afterlife can be scary. But it doesn’t have to be like that. When you think of the afterlife, it is important not to be terrified of punishment or making mistakes. God’s mercy is beyond our imagination. It is important to realize that God has given you free will. That means that the afterlife is nothing but the result of what you choose to do in this life. You can’t whine and complain that you are threatened with punishment. You are not! You are blessed with justice and fairness. You have a chance to determine your outcome by choosing in your every action to exercise the good qualities God has given you. Be bold! Step forward, without fear, in the knowledge that your steps are guided by the Almighty. We have nothing to fear if we keep our duty to Allah and do good to each other.

You might want to give your friend the example of life in school and the concept of reward and punishment. There are consequences for cheating, bullying, hurting others, being rude to the teachers etc. What if there were no consequences, only love and warm fuzzies? It might work for a couple of people, but for the rest, it would be a free pass to do whatever they wanted. Would those kids be able to learn without no system of checks and balances? Would the school benefit from a lack of consequences for misbehaving? Honestly, it would lead to total chaos! Even if your friend does not agree with you, as long as you understand the logic behind the concept of hell, all’s good. We can’t control or change how people think, but we can be at peace with ourselves and that is what really matters.

Baked Potato a la leftovers

When your tummy rumbles and you open the fridge and see leftovers peeking back at you, don’t despair. An amazing baked potato can save your tummy from more rumbles, and can save you from throwing precious food away.

What you need is a large potato, scrubbed ´til clean. Poke it a few times with a knife and wrap it in paper towel or paper bag. Zap it in the microwave for two minutes on one side. Flip it over and zap for another two minutes. When you remove your very hot potato carefully, (don’t drop it on your foot!) check to see if it is done by poking it with a knife. It should be soft and cut easily.

Place on a large plate, cut in half and the fun begins. Bring on leftovers! After dabbing a little butter on each side, add toppings. Shred chicken from yesterday’s curry and pile it on. Beans, fish, shrimp, ground beef, veggies – grilled or raw – are all good. Top with salsa or sour cream, sprinkle cheese, or mayo, ketchup, olives ... whatever strikes your fancy. Microwave for a minute to heat the toppings and you are ready for a delicious treat.

With Mother’s Day just behind us, maybe give your weary mother an extra break from cooking and announce you will cook dinner. Wow! your family with a baked potato leftover – Magnifique!!
How did the Blessed Prophet Teach us to Treat Animals?

From the article
“The Prophet as a mercy to the world”
by Dr. Zahid Aziz

In the news we hear a lot these days about people who call themselves Muslim, being extremely cruel to others. They blow themselves up in crowded places to kill others, and even attack students and teachers in schools and colleges. It makes people wonder: does Islam teach them to behave like that? Of course, the answer is: NO. They are behaving ignorantly, because they are unaware of the beautiful teachings of Islam, which inspire kindness and mercy to every living thing.

The Quran talks about animals by stating: “Do you not see that Allah is He Whom do glorify all those who are in the heavens and the earth, and the birds with wings outspread? Each one knows its prayer and its glorification” (24:41).

According to the Quran, all species are fully functioning groups, as are human beings, and they all have the right of existence:

“And there is no animal in the earth, nor a bird that flies on its two wings, but are communities like yourselves” (6:38).

When we read incidents from the blessed Prophet Muhammad’s life, recorded in books of hadith, we learn how merciful he was.

There is a chapter in Sahih Bukhari entitled “The superiority of (the good deed of) providing Water”. These hadith explain the importance of providing water to thirsty animals:

“Allah’s Messenger said: ‘While a man was walking he felt thirsty and went down a well and drank water from it. On coming out of it, he saw a dog panting and eating mud because of excessive thirst. The man said: This (dog) is suffering from the same problem as me. So he (went down the well) filled his shoe with water, caught hold of it...”
with his teeth and climbed up and watered the dog. Allah thanked him for that deed and forgave him. The people asked: O Messenger of Allah, Is there a reward for us in serving the animals? He said: For every creature having a liver fresh with life, there is a reward (for serving it). (Bukhari, www.sunnah.com/bukhari/42/11)

The Holy Prophet said that during a prayer he was shown hell very close, in a vision. He saw in it a woman who “was put in Hell because of a cat which she had kept locked till it died of hunger.” The Holy Prophet added that Allah said to the woman: “You neither fed it nor provided water when you locked it up, nor did you set it free to eat the insects of the earth.” (Abu Dawud, www.sunnah.com/abudawud/15/73)

The above report is contained in a chapter in Abu Dawud entitled: What Has Been Commanded Regarding Proper Care For Riding Beasts And Cattle.

Ibn Umar (son of Hazrat Umar) went to see someone and he came across that man’s son who had tied a hen to shoot things at it. The report says: “Ibn Umar walked to it and untied it. Then he brought it and the boy (to the father) and said: Prevent your boys from tying birds for the sake of killing them, as I have heard the Prophet forbidding the killing of an animal or other living thing after tying them.” (Bukhari, www.sunnah.com/bukhari/72/40)

Ibn Umar also said: “The Prophet cursed the one who did muthla to an animal (i.e., cut off its limbs or some other part of its body while it is still alive).” (Bukhari, www.sunnah.com/bukhari/72/42)

“We were with the Messenger of Allah during a journey. We saw a bird with her two young ones and we captured her young ones. The bird came and began to flap its wings. The Messenger of Allah came and said: ‘Who distressed her for its young ones? Return her young ones to it.’ He also saw an ant colony that we had burnt. He asked: Who has burnt this? We replied: We. He said: It is not proper for anyone to punish with fire, except for the Lord of fire.” (Abu Dawud)

How blessed is this religion that encourages us to do good in every way and rewards us for acts of kindness even towards animals. We can share these incidents with those who think Islam teaches violence, to show how merciful the final messenger was.
As I sit in my American garden and close my eyes, it all comes back to me. Those happy, carefree childhood days spent in India:

The rains had subsided and warmer, sunnier days were upon us in Kerala. My grandfather lived in a big house with a huge yard. In the yard, spring season would bring flowers of many kinds, growing wild, swaying in the wind and creating a kaleidoscope to brighten our days. I have loved flowers and plants for as long as I remember. I grew up in a small town surrounded by villages and farms. I always wonder if I would have felt the same love for plants if I had grown up in a big city apartment that overlooked other buildings.

I often wonder if my love of nature was inborn or was it nurtured by the surroundings I grew up in. I think it must have been inspired by the natural beauty around me. I hope children everywhere get a chance to be around gardens and learn to love them.

My grandfather was an extension scientist in an agricultural research institute specializing in coconut research. Kerala is known for its coconut palms which are seen practically everywhere. An extension scientist works on educating the farmers on the new research developments and its applications. My grandfather’s work made him very keen about plants and trees. He used to grow a lot of things in his yard, native as well as non-native plants. The non-native plants and trees made for good curiosities for visitors, and for me too.

Hence, I spent a long time under the fig tree in grandfather’s yard with a bough that spread wide and low. Many figs would grow on the trunk, but I think they never ripened well. I never really ate a ripe fig from the tree.

Then there were many native trees like mangoes and tamarinds, sapotas and jackfruits. The small, ripe mangoes would be blown down after a stormy night and would afford us some sweet treats in the morning.

It’s a pleasure to suck the juice out through a tiny hole bitten off at the tip. Those mangoes were the kinds that children love a lot. There were others for finer taste buds with buttery flesh and sweetness that would rival any sweet treat you can think of. There were also jackfruits and guavas: fruits galore in Kerala, like in all tropical parts of the world.

All these trees and plants made my grandfather’s yard a place that could very well have been a botanical garden! I used to walk around and observe things, appreciating the shade, the dappling light, the colors and the smell. I would pick flowers, collect dew drops on the glossy leaves of the taro plants and feel with my fingers, the hard surface of tree trunks and the feathery leaves of grasses.

And then, one day I decided to garden under a favorite tree in the yard of my own house. There was a small mound of earth to one side of the tree adjacent to the back
wall of our yard. I made two small steps on the mound by digging away dirt and flattening the surface. I had in mind the terraced rice fields on hills I had studied about in social science at school. I made my own miniature terraces and then planted some balsams, those lovely flowers that look like the flowing layers of a princess gown and are very easily grown from seeds. My great grandmother, who was my caregiver for a while when my parents were away, seemed awfully proud of my work.

I watered my plants daily, and waited for them to grow. But my flowers didn’t do as well as I had seen them do in other gardens. My enthusiasm was dampened by my partial failure, and for many years hence, I never set out to create a garden all by myself.

In hindsight, I think that the poor growth that my balsams showed may have been due to the lack of any sunlight under the tree. Even though balsams are shade loving, it is possible that the shade was too deep there. And it is possible that the soil was too tough there. Today, I know much more about gardening and love doing it. I learn from my mistakes and never let them spoil my enthusiasm. I rejoice in the moments when my plants bloom or fruit well.

I have learned that gardening is about understanding what the plants need. Just as we need certain things to grow and be happy and healthy, the plants have their needs. Our plans and efforts should be based on those needs and requirements. Otherwise, we will find ourselves exerting effort against nature’s laws that are really Allah’s laws for the world.

Allah’s glory and praise for Him becomes our second nature!

I wish I had asked my grandfather about the plants he grew and talked to him more about his work rather than just being a silent observer of nature. Nature opens itself to the curious mind and teaches a lot of lessons. We are also part of nature and understanding it is like understanding ourselves. Also, it leads us to a better appreciation of Allah’s glory and praise for Him.

I hope my story will set you out on an exploration of nature through gardening. There is great peace and relaxation to be found in gardens, in digging in the soil and experimenting with seeds. Please try it for yourself. Happy gardening readers!

Crossword Answers
If you have a problem with Islam, ask me, don’t make fun of me!

Does freedom of speech include the right to ridicule and insult others? The Quran says NO: Verse 108 of Al-Anaam, The Cattle says:

“And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest, exceeding the limits, they abuse Allah through ignorance. This to every people have We made their deeds seem fair, then to their Lord is their return so He will inform them of what they did.”

There is great wisdom in this guidance from Allah. It is Divine wisdom and far superior to any laws devised by humans. We are told to not abuse anyone who is revered and worshipped by other faiths. It is human nature that an insulting action can bring about a reaction from those who are unable to control their emotions. While the Quran advises us to bear patiently what the ignorant say, it does not give anyone the license to ridicule and provoke others, calling it freedom of speech. With freedom comes responsibility, and those who are not ready to behave responsibly, have no right to that freedom.

It is interesting to note that those who misunderstand Islam and resort to cartoons to express their ignorance, frustration, or bad experience with certain groups, do not seem to be making any attempt to clear their misunderstandings. Instead, they want others to think like them. If they were truly in favor of freedom, they would make an attempt to understand the issues that bother them. That would be an educated, a liberated and modern method. They would approach Muslims respectfully to ask the questions they had. Everyone has the right to question and seek explanations. Islam encourages freedom of thought and expression within respectful limits, for it is only through respect that understanding can come. A person making fun of another, is not creating anything positive.

What you can do?

We can emphasize the need for respect, by making posters to inform others of the need for respect for all religions and religious figures. We must speak loudly for including religious freedom among the other freedoms that are celebrated. If your school is a No Place for Hate campus, join their efforts and include all religious groups in a pledge for respect for everyone. The Anti-Defamation League has an excellent program for schools: http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/no-place-for-hate/

It is up to you to raise your voice for Muslims and to make sure people understand the far-reaching consequences of allowing hate speech in the name of “freedom”.

Good Deeds

By Raafe Rahman

Helping People:

If you see a poor person, it would be the right thing to help that person.

Being Generous:

For example, when you share your candy with someone or share your new toy it is a good thing to do.

Being Grateful:

When you write a thank you note, it is like telling someone you appreciate their kindness.