

## IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE MIRAGE

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The April 1872 issue of *Atlantic* magazine contains a long narrative poem by John Greenleaf Whittier titled “The Brewing of Soma.” It describes Vedic priests going into the forest and drinking themselves into a stupor with a concoction called soma, which supposedly enabled them to contact the spirit world. After describing in some detail the ensuing scene of revelry and debauchery, Whittier presses home the message of the poem: a stern lesson about repentance and restraint.

The words of Whittier’s poem subsequently become a well-known Christian hymn. A universalized version, which we will sing as our closing hymn, appears in our hymnal. In its original setting, the poem’s final stanzas include these lines:

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
Forgive our foolish ways;  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,  
In purer lives Thy service find,  
In deeper reverence, praise.*

*Drop Thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of Thy peace.*

*Breathe through the heat of our desire  
Thy coolness and Thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm.*

In the poem, Whittier recognizes that human life is mostly constituted by striving, fueled by what he calls “the heat of our desire.” The problem, he says, is that striving often leads us to live in foolish ways, which puts strain and stress on our souls. As an antidote, Whittier counsels a return to our rightful minds, which will enable us to live what he calls “ordered lives.”

I thought about this poem recently when I came across yet another reference to something called voluntary hardship. Over the past number of months, I’ve seen the

term used in discussions of financial planning, personal development, weightlifting, as well as spiritual practice. The theory is that you can best develop your strength, whether strength of body, mind, or character, by choosing to do difficult things, which is why it's a hardship, but they are things that you don't actually have to do, which is why it's voluntary.

The term voluntary hardship may be new, but the idea is an ancient one, going back at least to Aristotle. In his book on ethics, Aristotle says that we develop virtues by exercising them. Just as we become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre, he says, so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, and brave by doing brave acts. On these terms, voluntary hardship ensures that the heat of our desires is always constrained by the way our rightful minds impose order on our lives as a whole.

To me, one of the best examples of voluntary hardship is the practice of devout Muslims during Ramadan, which began two weeks ago and ends on June 4. Ramadan is a month-long period during which faithful Muslims fast from dawn until sundown. They abstain from food and drink (including water), as well as from sexual relations. In New York, the period of abstinence began this morning with Sehar at 3:58 AM, and it ends with Iftar at 8:14 PM this evening, a period of more than 16 hours. This is mainly a time for self-restraint and self-purification. By cutting off certain comforts, even for a short time, Muslims focus on the presence of God and on their purpose in life, as well as on those who are truly needy.

As you may already know, Ramadan is the fourth of the five pillars of Islam. The first is a profession of faith in the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. The second is prayer. Wherever they are, regardless of what they are doing, faithful Muslims stop and pray five times each day, at dawn, mid-day, late afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. This pattern establishes an ongoing rhythm of mindfulness and purpose. The third pillar involves giving alms to the poor and needy. Muslims believe that everything belongs to God, and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. Our possessions are purified when we set aside a proportion for those in need. The fourth pillar is fasting during Ramadan, and the fifth is a pilgrimage to Mecca, called a *hajj*, which Muslims who are able must make once during their lifetimes. Pilgrims wear simple garments that strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before God.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who was raised Muslim, is widely considered Palestine's most eminent poet. In a poem titled "In Her Absence I Created Her Image," Darwish celebrates the practice of absence. He writes:

In her absence I created her image: out of the earthly  
the hidden heavenly commences.  
... and absence is the guide, it is the guide.  
Absence teaches me its lesson: If it weren't

for the mirage you wouldn't have been steadfast ...  
If it weren't for the mirage  
I wouldn't have walked to the seven hills ...  
if it weren't for the mirage!

When something we desire is taken from us, whether voluntarily or not, there is a lesson to be learned, Darwish says. In this sense, voluntary hardship is like a mirage: it's not a hardship in the true sense of the word, because we don't actually have to undertake it. But we undertake the hardship anyway, because we know it will take us to places we could never go if we chose only what's comfortable and close at hand. Voluntary hardship, whether it takes the form of spiritual practices like meditation and prayer, or physical exertions like rigorous exercise or physical deprivations like fasting, enables us to constrain our human tendency to let our desires get the best of us.

Over time, we discover that many of our apparent desires are actually quite superficial and ephemeral. Voluntary hardship enables us to focus on our underlying desires — desires that, when pursued, will prove genuinely transformative. Our challenge is winnowing down our many desires to the few that truly matter. The fifteenth-century Indian mystic Kabir, a poet and philosopher who today is revered by both Muslims and Hindus, gives us a roadmap for the journey.

Kabir views desire as having four stages. The vast majority of people, he says, are born with countless desires — too many desires to pursue any one of them with conviction or dedication. Most of these desires concern the superficial aspects of life, such as personal appearance or personal possessions. People who have many desires are the poorest of people, Kabir says, and they seldom achieve any lasting success. Their lives are also the saddest, because they are the most superficial, dominated by too many desires that matter too little.

There are other people, Kabir goes on to say, who are born with some desires, and these are usually people who lead what are considered successful lives. No matter what field of endeavor they choose, they manage to accomplish at least modest goals, because they are able to focus on only some desires.

A fortunate few individuals, however, have only a few desires. Out of these come the geniuses: great scientists like Madame Curie and Albert Einstein, great musicians and poets, great humanitarians and political leaders. These individuals have focused their desires, and thus they will make their mark in whatever field they commit themselves to.

Finally, a rare few individuals have only one desire. These are the great mystics — spiritual leaders who often practice meditation, a demanding discipline designed to reduce the number of desires. Over time, Kabir says, meditation can reduce a person's desires from countless to many; then from many to some; from some to a few; and from a few to only one.

When all of a person's passions — personal ambition, the pursuit of pleasure, the need for prestige, the preoccupation with profit — become melded into one flaming passion that sears the heart, the result is a singular passion that Kabir calls devotion. In the mystical tradition, devotion leads to the discovery of the self. We discover who we really are, and what really matters to us.

One means of paring down the list, as Kabir noted, is meditation. Another is adversity, known in the mystical tradition as suffering. When life becomes difficult and uncertain, superficial desires fall away, and what remains is what really matters to us. People who have experienced extreme and often involuntary hardship — soldiers in combat, women living under oppressive regimes, prisoners of conscience, slaves, victims of torture — all report more or less the same thing about the consequences of suffering. When life itself is uncertain, only one thing matters: survival. Life becomes exceedingly simple, its purpose crystal clear. The many desires of life are purified by the fires of adversity; what remains is the one thing that both demands and deserves complete devotion.

Placed in this context, voluntary hardship is the process of building our strength — strength of mind, strength of body, strength of character — so that we have the capacity to respond to life's most challenging demands. It's grappling with an imposed adversity on purpose. In the absence of actual adversity, voluntary hardship is the mirage that leads us to the place where we need to go — the place where we find ourselves wholly devoted to the things that matter most.

As we look around us at the many calamities roiling our world today, it's clear that we will need all the strength and devotion we can develop to address them. The ongoing retrograde motion of our nation and world on immigrants' rights, women's freedom to choose, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, voting rights, environmental justice — the list of daunting challenges runs long. We need to get strong and stay strong to wage these battles.

The spiritual practice of undertaking voluntary hardships, no matter their form, can help us develop our spiritual strength and focus our moral purpose. These times require us to be at our best. It will take all the strength we can muster, and all the devotion we can develop, to turn the tide of history and bend it once again toward justice.