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Northern California: Mostly cloudy, showers arriving late, turning windy along the coast north of the Bay Area. Otherwise, increasing clouds. Weather map and details on Page A18.

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ONE DOLLAR

Learning a Lesson for Ramadan

By Asma Gull Hasan

SAN FRANCISCO

Every Ramadan, I learn something new.

When I attended Catholic grade school in Colorado, I usually sat out of religion class and read textbooks about Islam that my mom had bought for me. The books said that Muslims must fast when they are old enough, once a year, to remember God, to experience suffering and to learn self control. The last reason always perplexed me.

Every year my mother would tell stories about Ramadan when she was little and growing up in Pakistan

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— how the table at sunset would be full of delicacies; how she and her siblings would hold handfuls of food in front of their mouths, waiting for the cue from my grandfather to eat. At the end of the month of fasting, he would sacrifice a lamb, in the name of God, and feed it to the poor.

The first time I fasted was when I was 14 and attending school away from home. Marching up to the man in charge of the cafeteria, I fully expected to be rebuffed when I asked for food to take back to my dorm for a predawn breakfast. But he just looked me in the eyes and asked what I would like to eat. Had I not been so stunned by his acceptance, I might have asked for a table full of Pakistani treats.

Later that night, nibbling on the turkey sandwich he gave me, I proudly told another girl in my dorm, "I'm fasting for Ramadan!" For the first time, I was doing something

that wasn't primarily for my parents or for good grades. By fasting, I was doing something for God.

In college, on Saturday nights, other Muslim students and I would take the school van to a pancake house at 4 a.m. I told my non-Muslim friends, who always accompanied me to dinner in the dining hall at sunset, how the entire holy month of Ramadan to me was about feeling suffering and deprivation. This impression was reinforced by the fancy brochures my family and other Muslims I know received in the mail around Ramadan. They came from Islamic charities and described how, with only a small donation, one could feed a Muslim family in Bosnia for a month. Giving to charity is a central tenet of Islam and a tradition during Ramadan.

Ramadan begins tonight, but this year I don't have much enthusiasm for telling people I'm fasting. With

the Rev. Jerry Falwell referring to Muhammad as a "terrorist" and the Rev. Franklin Graham calling Islam a "very evil and wicked religion," I can't help but feel that anything that sounds Islamic will be perceived as

Challenges of faith and charity as a holiday begins.

anti-American.

If you had told me at Ramadan two years ago that I would swallow hard before entering airport security or before logging onto my e-mail account (for fear of receiving another nasty, anti-Muslim message), I would have laughed. I have a hard

time believing many things this Ramadan: that my mother's donation to feed a Muslim family in Bosnia probably landed her name on a list at the Justice Department; that my grandmother can't ask a relative to take money to the shrines of Sufi saints in Pakistan and India like she always does for fear of coming under suspicion for laundering money for terrorist causes; that I can't attend a mosque gathering to open the holiday without worrying that my license plate number will be put in a file of mosque-goers.

If self control means resolving my frustration at not feeling free to practice my faith as I did as a little girl, if self control means not being able to give to charity at the precise time my God has asked me to help others, then I now know why God wanted Muslims to learn self control.

Every Ramadan, I learn something new. □