

A jihad against the self

Muslims observe holy
month of fasting and
introspection.

BY *Kaukab Jhumra Smith*

I slip off my shoes at the threshold of the Abu-Bakr As-Siddiq Islamic Center, lining them up alongside pairs of varying sizes. A handwritten notice on the door urges people to leave their shoes outside: "This is a house of worship," it says. I follow Abdullah Al-Heymare, the slight, voluble owner of Crescent Autos, inside the only mosque in Eugene. It is my first time here.

With an aging coat of pale pistachio paint, the Islamic Center on West Broadway looks like a well-worn family home. The front yard boasts fig trees and rose bushes, and on the porch two small children in crocheted white caps try to entice a cat out from behind a chair to play.

Abdullah leads me through a well-laid out facility: a spacious kitchen, and a slightly dusty library stacked with books and tapes. We go through a rec room of sorts, where the two little kids have begun a game of ping-pong. Worn cushy couches group together on the room's other side, and pictures of Muslim holy sites line the wall. The sparse prayer room, carpeted in cream, holds a single bookshelf in the corner. No other furniture is required, as congregations pray on the floor. Today is Friday, the holy day of the week, and we are here for afternoon Jummah prayers.

This is also the last Friday before the beginning of Ramadan, the ninth and holiest month of the Muslim lunar calendar. When a pale new crescent appears in North American skies, Ramadan in Eugene will begin: This year, it started on Monday, Oct. 27.

Ramadan is the month when a billion Muslims around the

world undertake a "jihad against the self," refraining from food, drink, sex and all negative or hurtful actions, from dawn to dusk. A three-day celebration called Eid-ul-Fitr — coinciding nicely with Thanksgiving this year — will crown their month-long exercise in self-discipline.

Muslims believe Ramadan marks the month that God unveiled the first verses of the Qur'an, Islam's holy book, to the prophet Mohammad. It's a striking story: As Mohammad meditated and fasted in a cave on Mount Hira outside Mecca, a strong force gripped his chest and commanded him "Recite!" Frightened, Mohammad refused, saying he did not know how. The force, the angel Gabriel, squeezed him again, commanding "Recite!" Mohammed again refused. The third time, Mohammad found himself reciting Arabic verses commanding worship of the God who created each human from an embryo. Initially unwilling, Mohammad became God's messenger, and so "Al-Qur'an" literally translates as "The Recitation" of God's word.

More than 12 years later, Mohammad received a revelation making Ramadan a month of fasting.

O believers, fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, so that you might learn self-restraint.

Stressing that God does not wish believers undue hardship, the verses lay out certain conditions: If you are traveling, sick, preg-

nant, nursing or menstruating, you are not required to fast. Once able, you can make up a missed fast any other day of the year, or if still unable, feed a poor person in lieu of each missed fast.

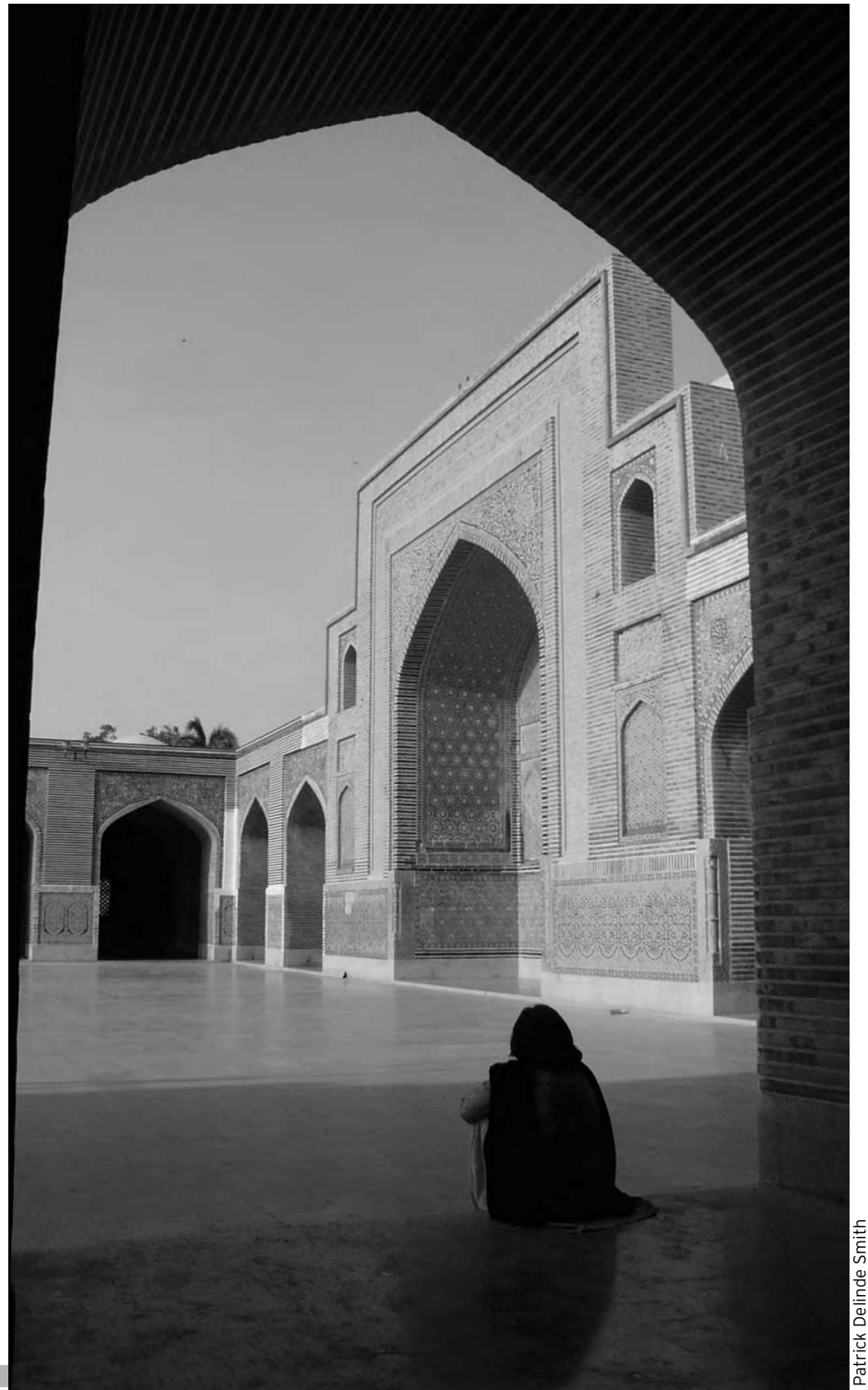
This Friday before Ramadan, Talal Al Rahbi, a Lane County employee and graduate student in public policy, refers to these Qur'anic verses as he leads the mosque's congregation. Like everywhere else, Muslims here often take turns leading prayers as Islam maintains no clergy.

In his sermon, Al Rahbi emphasizes that the concept of Ramadan extends far beyond foregoing food and drink. Fasting is a *jihad al-nafs* — a struggle against the self, the original spirit of *jihad* in the Qur'an. Often misunderstood to mean "holy war," *jihad* means to strive in God's cause, not by fighting with arms, but by positive action. And so, to fast during Ramadan means to strive for discipline not just over your hunger but also over impulses such as anger, dishonesty, laziness, gossip and prejudice. "Allah does not need you to leave your food and drink (if) you do the same bad things as before," says Al Rahbi.

After a month of such self-restraint, Abdullah Al-Heymare tells me, your conscience continues its fast through the year.

As difficult as fasting can be, some Muslims thrive in its challenge of constant self-awareness from the dawn meal of *sahoor* to the sunset meal of *iftar*.

"I find that I can think much more deeply," says Maryam Rankin, a retiree who converted to Islam 17 years ago. "I don't know how to



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