

Expressions of gratitude

Eid al-Fitr is one of the two major festivals celebrated by Muslims worldwide. Often called the “Festival of Breaking the Fast,” it marks the end of Ramadan – the month of fasting, prayer and reflection. Eid al-Fitr is a time of gratitude, generosity, and communal celebration, when families and friends gather to share festive meals, exchange gifts, and extend kindness to those in need. The occasion emphasizes charity and compassion, with Muslims encouraged to give to the less fortunate before the Eid prayers commence.

Eid al-Adha, known as the “Festival of Sacrifice,” is the second major Islamic celebration. This significant holiday commemorates the unwavering faith of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham, peace be upon him) and his willingness to sacrifice for the sake of God.

As I celebrate the end of Ramadan, my heart is filled with joy and gratitude for the countless blessings God has bestowed upon me. In this moment of reflection and appreciation, I cannot help but recognize one of the greatest sources of happiness I have been fortunate to experience.

I have always been a staunch supporter of freedom of speech and expression. I practice it regardless of the consequences – believe me, they can be severe – and defend it fiercely. As Voltaire famously said, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will

defend to the death your right to say it.”

So, when Dr. Ahmed Abo Basha and I visited the Stillwater News Press office to inquire about writing for the Faith page, we were warmly received by Mr. Beau Simmons, the editor. To my surprise, he immediately agreed to publish my work and provided the deadline for submitting my writings. I was in disbelief. We told him we were from the Islamic Center of Stillwater, and he agreed! Would a newspaper in the U.S. allow me to write about Islam? With all that I hear in the mainstream media, my instinctive answer was no.

I am no stranger to writing for newspapers. As a graduate student at OSU, I wrote for The O’Colly, mainly political writings, and for years before that, I contributed dozens of articles to an Egyptian newspaper, sharing my perspectives on politics, the economy, and faith.

So, I wrote my first article and submitted it to the SNP, eagerly awaiting its publication – not out of vanity, but because I had a bet with Dr. Abo Basha that it wouldn’t be published. He won!

Still, I didn’t learn my lesson. I sent a second article, then a third, and many more. Each time, I bet Dr. Abo Basha that this time my article wouldn’t make it to print. And each time, he won. Dr. Abo Basha is a veteran Stillwater resident. He lived in Stillwater for some 43 years.

I’ve always understood that freedom of speech



Guest
Column

HATIM HEGAB

and expression are fundamental rights in the U.S. Constitution. But coming from my background, I’ve seen firsthand how a country can have the most beautifully written constitution while none of its promises are honored. That’s why I’m drawn to actions rather than just words. The SNP has demonstrated a genuine commitment to these principles – not just talking about them but putting them into practice in ways that make a difference.

In an era where, in some countries, editorial control so often waters down writers’ voices, I’m truly grateful to the SNP for the remarkable freedom they’ve given me to write about Islam. The Egyptian newspaper I worked with did the same thing years ago – perhaps that’s why their editor-in-chief is living in exile now! That contrast puts things in perspective and makes me appreciate what I have here even more.

For many, writing about faith – especially a religion as widely discussed and, at times, misunderstood as Islam – comes with the expectation of editorial intervention. Yet, to my amazement, the SNP has neither asked for modifications nor imposed its in-

terpretations on my work. Instead, it has afforded me the rare privilege of expressing my thoughts on Islam in my own voice, allowing the message to reach readers unfiltered and unaltered.

This commitment to journalistic integrity and intellectual freedom is a testament to the newspaper’s dedication to fostering open dialogue. By giving space to my writings without restriction, the SNP has demonstrated respect for my perspective and facilitated an avenue for readers to engage with Islamic teachings in their purest form. Doing so has contributed to greater understanding and tolerance in our great Stillwater community.

In a time when sensationalism often overshadows sincere discourse and when many media outlets hesitate to publish unvarnished perspectives on religion, the SNP’s stance is a beacon of fairness and open-mindedness. It is reassuring to know that there are still platforms committed to the free exchange of ideas, allowing discussions on faith to unfold naturally and authentically.

Also, the Stillwater community is truly remarkable. I anticipated receiving hate messages – criticisms, “go home” remarks, and the like – but instead, I was met with support and encouragement. Many readers thanked me for clarifying misunderstandings and helping them understand more about Islam and

Muslims. Some expressed appreciation for my explanation of how the name of God, Allah, is pronounced. One email read: “God, it comes from deep within oneself.” The repeated line [Allah is the name of God in Arabic and Aramaic. It is pronounced with an emphatic “L,” as in the word “illustrate,” not as in the name “Al”], lead some to think it is a religious statement!

Not a single hate email arrived – nor even one that could be considered unfriendly. A true testament to the peaceful and inclusive nature of the community I have chosen to call home and where I am raising my children. To all Stillwater residents and all SNP readers – thank you.

From my heart, I thank the editor, the publisher, and everyone at the SNP. Thank you for upholding the principles of free speech, trusting my voice, and playing a vital role in fostering knowledge and understanding. May your commitment to journalistic integrity and local journalism inspire and set a precedent for others.

The Qur’an says, **“O, people! We created you from a male and a female, and We made you races and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. The best among you before Allah is the most righteous. Allah is Knowing and Aware”** [Qur’an 49: 13]. The verse proves that people will differ in their choices and beliefs, but the main message is that people need to get to

know each other through communication and help each other.

Even the Sunnah (tradition of Prophet Muhammad, pbuh) encourages inclusivity. It is narrated that the Prophet Muhammad was asked, “What is the best act of Islam?” The Prophet Muhammad replied: *“To feed others and to give greetings of Salam (to say peace be upon you) to those whom you know and those whom you do not know.”*

It is important to note that Prophet Jesus (pbuh) also used this same greeting! In Luke 24:36, we read: *“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”* This is no coincidence. Both Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Prophet Jesus (pbuh) were divinely sent messengers of God (Allah), and both received and conveyed the same message of faith, peace, and submission to the One Creator. Their teachings align, emphasizing monotheism, righteousness, and compassion.

Again, my sincere thanks to the Stillwater News Press. As long as I’m able, I promise to keep writing – and yes, to keep losing those bets to Dr. Abo Basha!

*The bet is “prepare him a cup of tea every time he asks for one for a week.”

To contact the author:
hatim.hegab@gmail.com

For more information:
icstillwater.org/islam