

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Leading the way to understanding and acceptance

By Douglas Kindschi

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It is that time of the year when graduates complete their studies and prepare for the next phase of their lives — often further education or beginning a career.

It is the time when commencement speakers urge graduates to be true to themselves. Pursue your vision, follow your dream, be successful, seize the day (“carpe diem”).

It is a call to what New York Times columnist David Brooks refers to as building your “résumé virtues or the skills you bring to the marketplace.”

But in a recent column titled “The Moral Bucket List,” he urges consideration of the eulogy virtues: “whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful.”

Brooks questions the typical commencement speaker’s

message as “a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people ... do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world’s deep needs?”



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In the column, based on his recent book, “The Road to Character,” Brooks calls for a re-evaluation of his own sense of purpose.

While recognizing he has himself achieved a considerable level of career success, he questions whether he has found that deeper level of inner character and meaning in life. His moral bucket list includes a profound sense of humility, recognition of

dependency, the importance of making commitments and realizing a “kind of love that decenters the self.”

It involves moving beyond career to a calling, empathetic understanding, and renewal of conscience.

While not using religious language, his moral bucket list is certainly in line with the great teachings of most religions.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we read, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.” (Proverbs 11:2)

Jesus tells his disciples, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.” (Luke 17:33)

And the very term “Islam” means submission and humility before God.

There are similar principles in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu leader of the nonviolent

liberation of India, tells us, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

This week, at the Interfaith Leadership Dinner, the Kaufman Institute recognized three women, who back in the 1980s, asked the question that David Brooks suggests, “What is life expecting of me?” and began the interfaith agenda in Grand Rapids.

Lillian Sigal, the widow of Rabbi Phillip Sigal; Marchiene Rienstra, a Christian minister; and Ghazala Munir, an activist in the Muslim community, brought together local religious and academic leaders for monthly interfaith dialogue. Soon, their effort expanded to other religious traditions, and in 1990, they established the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA).

Its mission was to seek understanding among all faith communities, eliminate prejudice, foster appreciation and promote friend-

ship and trust among people of diverse ideologies and religions.

About the same time, Sylvia Kaufman, a community leader in Muskegon, initiated the Jewish-Christian Dialogue in that community, beginning what now is the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. The development of these two communities is the subject of a document just published by the Aspen Institute titled, “Interfaith Engagement in West Michigan: A Brief History and Analysis.”

If you would like a complimentary copy of this 80-page document, please contact us at the email address below.

We can all be thankful that these four women led the way in developing a spirit of understanding and acceptance in our communities. They answered the question of what life expected of them, and we are all the beneficiaries of their leadership.

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