

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Trying to change our world, one story at a time

By Katie Gordon

Program Manager, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

If you had \$1 million to fulfill a wish to change the world, what would you do?

This question is asked every year to the TED Prize recipient.

TED is a non-profit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks.

It began in 1984 as a conference for technology, entertainment and design, but cover almost all topics today — from science to business to global issues — worldwide.

This year, Dave Isay, founder of StoryCorps, revealed his world-changing idea: listening.

StoryCorps, a public radio initiative that seeks to archive the wisdom of humanity through stories shared between loved ones and strangers, is based on the premise that each human being has a meaningful story to share.



Gordon

To me, this idea is deeply grounded in the same premise of interfaith dialogue — each person and their story matters, in Isay's words, "equally and infinitely."

In interfaith dialogue, we communicate our traditions and our values through storytelling, and we come to understand the experience of others through listening. These stories range from those found in traditions' scriptures to stories created in our communities or families today. Stories allow for us to learn with not only the mind, but also the heart.

Recognizing this potential that stories have to empower individuals and unite communities, Marshall Ganz, senior lecturer at Harvard University and longtime grassroots organizer, developed a framework of storytelling for social change.

In his words, stories connect "the three elements of self, us, and now: why I am called, why we are called, and why we are called to act now."

Coming from a Jewish family, Ganz also recalls the 1st-century

sage, Rabbi Hillel, who similarly expressed this idea: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?"



Isay

In the interfaith movement, we view stories as tools for increasing understanding.

For example, reading statistics on Islamophobia is one thing, but hearing a story from a Muslim experiencing discrimination communicates an entirely different message.

As Ganz says, our values are embedded into our stories, and thus translated into action; it is through this sharing that solidarity is created and common goals are inspired.

In these individual stories of interfaith dialogue and cooperation, we create collective stories that become counter-narratives to the news coverage we often see of religion being violent and divisive.

Through the interfaith move-

ment, we have the power to not only voice our own stories, but we also have the power to rewrite the role that religion plays in society.

We can show through our stories of self, us, and now, that religion can lead to cooperation rather than conflict, and inspire unity instead of division.

The charge for us becomes, inspired by Isay's initiative and Ganz's framework, how can we create spaces to listen, understand, and be inspired by the stories of those around us?

My own "story of now" is one in which we must come together to transform ourselves and our communities to be more inclusive and interconnected.

If you have a similar vision, I invite you to start today — talk to one person of a different tradition or background.

Whether you do this through our Year of Interfaith Service activities, in your workplace or in your neighborhood, you will see for yourself the transformational power of listening and storytelling.

Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu