

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Building a common life after the presidential election

By Katie Gordon

Program manager of Kaufman
Interfaith Institute

These past few weeks, as we have come closer to the end of an election campaign cycle that has proved ugly and divisive, I have become increasingly focused, not on Tuesday, but on Wednesday and beyond.

This campaign has deepened divides among Americans, and this social reality will not disappear once we elect a new president. The concerns that have been raised, the pain that has been made public, will live on and remain necessary to address.

Eboo Patel and Krista Tippett recently addressed this topic — and their visions for where we go from here — at a panel I attended that was hosted by Interfaith Youth Core. Held in Chicago, the discussion was titled “Diversity, Disagreement and Democracy: Faith & Politics in an Election Year.”



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Patel, founder and director of Interfaith Youth Core, and Tippett, radio show and podcast host of “On Being,” brought wisdom and foresight to a challenging question of our time: How do we live together beyond this election?

Because, as we were reminded by Tippett: “If we don’t live together, we don’t live.”

AMERICANS HAVE MANY DIFFERENCES

It has become increasingly evident during this campaign cycle that we, as Americans and fellow citizens, have many differences. We come from diverse backgrounds, we live out values in conflicting ways, and we hold varied ideologies. Diversity is a fact of America. But how we engage diversity is a choice.

And importantly, as Patel often notes, diversity does not just include differences we like. Diversity also includes the differences we do not like, and the differences we would rather not engage.

These are the differences that have become most prominent during the presidential election.

But when the differences are so numerous and the divides so vast, how can we imagine constructing a common life? When compromise is seemingly impossible amid polarized, partisan rhetoric, what hope do we have in creating circumstances for common ground to exist and flourish?

Our panelists, each coming from their fields of interfaith engagement and journalism, brought two answers to the question of how we can build common ground and a common life: relationships and listening.

Patel reminded us, even when individuals are not able to agree or cooperate on one task or goal, there is the possibility of finding another shared goal they can work on together. The interfaith movement is rich in examples of groups that find certain projects to work on together when they remain in disagreement about other issues.

Even while people from varying religious, spiritual and secular traditions have different notions of life and death, they can find shared interests and build common ground.

Tippett then reminded us political life requires not only advocates, those who seek to further their issues and goals, but also listeners.

Listening, she said, is not just about being quiet and waiting your turn to speak. Listening is about being present and hearing the pain or concern of another. By doing so, we enlarge our sense of the world and deepen our understanding of ourselves and others along the way.

SIMPLISTIC? IDEALISTIC?

Relationships and listening. This might sound simplistic and idealistic to some, or like a feel-good Band-Aid to a much deeper broken system. But I believe living out these ideas in practice is something that can truly change our communities and society.

And the reality is, these things already are creating positive change and growth for our country. The stories of people building relationships and cooperation across differences — or using listening and dialogue as a tool for social change — are the ones I hear weekly on Tippett’s radio program. These stories are

the ones thousands of Interfaith Youth Core students and alumni across the country are promoting through their work, which spans disciplines and fields.

Common ground and the common life already is being constructed through relationships and listening, but we do not hear these stories on the evening news. So, part of our challenge, during and after this presidential election, is to not only utilize these approaches, but to pay attention and take this alternative narrative seriously.

Yes, brokenness and hopelessness are real. I see it and feel it, like many others, on a daily basis.

But a common life is still possible because dialogue and cooperation also are real.

Let us live in this reality together, not as Democrats and Republicans or as conservatives and progressives, but as collaborators toward the common life. Because, as Tippett reminded us at the panel, the “together” part of this work is not an option — it is a necessity. We live together, or we don’t live at all.

— interfaith@gvsu.edu