

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Face the future without fear by coming together



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"These are times that try men's souls." Quoting Thomas Paine, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks began his TED2017 talk in Vancouver last April. Recognizing that it is also true today, he cited the growth of extremism, divisive elections and divided societies that leads to the anxiety and the fear that threatens our faith in the future. But his talk, titled "How we can face the future without fear," gives us a more hopeful message. The video of his 12-minute talk is available at bit.ly/Sacks_atTED, and it is well worth watching.

Sacks addresses the issue by looking at what people worship, which historically has included the sun, the stars and many other things.

"In the 19th and 20th centuries, people worshiped the nation, the Aryan race, the communist state. What do we worship?" he asks. In today's world, the emphasis seems to be on self-realization and self-esteem. Morality is seen as being true to oneself and politics a matter of individual rights. He suggests that future anthropologists will "look at this wonderful new religious ritual we have created... the 'selfie' ... and conclude that what we worship in our time is the self, the me, the I."

Sacks reminds us that for most of our evolutionary history we lived in small groups, and we are biologically social animals. It was in such settings that we learned the virtues of altruism, friendship, trust, loyalty

and love. If we are to face the future without fear, it must be with a "we" approach and not with so much of the "I."

Sacks discusses three dimensions of how to strengthen the "us" in terms of relationship, identity and responsibility.

To illustrate the "us" of relationship, he tells a story of his own youthful study of philosophy, absorbed in the existentialists such as Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus. Being "full of ontological uncertainty and existential angst," he became "self-obsessed and thoroughly unpleasant to know."

But then he met a girl who was everything that he wasn't. She was joyful and "radiated sunshine." They married and now, 47 years later, have a happy and large family. He says it was the best decision of his life "because it's the people not like us that make us grow."

WE NEED PEOPLE NOT LIKE US

He refers to a Harvard study that shows surrounding one's self with those with whom we agree tends to make one more extreme. Could the technologies of the internet and cable news be leading us to more isolation and interaction only with ideas with which we agree?

Sacks says we need "face-to-face encounters with the people not like us ... in order to realize that we can disagree strongly and yet still stay friends." Furthermore, "every time we hold out the hand of friendship to somebody not like us, whose class or creed or color are different from ours, we heal one of the fractures of our wounded world."

Sacks illustrates the "us" of identity by noting that while memorials in England

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usually have just the name of the person being honored, in the United States, the memorials to Lincoln, Jefferson, and Martin Luther King are surrounded by quotations from their writings and speeches.

"America was from the outset a nation of wave after wave of immigrants," he explains, "so it had to create an identity, which it did by telling a story which you learned at school, you read on memorials and you heard repeated in presidential inaugural addresses."

Telling the story is important in building a nation's identity.

"When you tell a story, your identity is strong, you can welcome the stranger, but when you stop telling the story, your identity gets weak and you feel threatened by the

stranger."

The third dimension, the "us" of responsibility, is based on what Sacks calls his favorite phrase of all of politics: "We the people." It is a call to "share collective responsibility for our collective future."

Rather than thinking that some strong leader will solve our problems, which also tends toward the extreme, we must come together in a politics of all of us together. We discover "that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, that it becomes rich when it cares for the poor, it becomes invulnerable when it cares about the vulnerable. That is what makes great nations." That is how we move from the politics of me to the politics of us.

'SEARCH AND REPLACE'

Sacks concludes his TED Talk by making a simple suggestion to "do a search and replace operation" in our thinking. Instead of "self," replace it with "other." Instead of thinking about self-help and self-esteem, think other-help and other-esteem.

By doing so, he suggests, we will feel the power of what Sacks considers "one of the most moving sentences of all religious literature: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.' We can face any future without fear so long as we know we will not face it alone."

Let us heed this call to come together, resist the "me" culture, and find strength in our diversity by affirming the other.

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