

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Community and the thriving of the human spirit

Fred Keller

Following are excerpts from Fred Keller's reflections at the 2017 Interfaith Thanksgiving event.

We are here today to appreciate and celebrate what we all have in common and to emphasize the oneness of humankind. In building on the oneness, we must also celebrate simultaneously those characteristics that differentiate us.

My observation and my hope for the future is that communities will demonstrate their ability to live and love and work and play in an authentically harmonious way. It is because we honor our differences that we become strong as a community through working and planning and living together.

There is a current narrative that if we only had the right political party in power or the right president or the right governor, our lives would be better off. But I am enamored with the idea that communities have all the resources and capabilities to make the changes they need to have everyone thriving within them. As we work together, we co-create solutions that honor the differences and use the natural creativity that flows when differences are brought together.

Let's explore this idea of how we can be a community where the human spirit thrives for everyone.

We first observe that we tend not to surround ourselves with people who think and act differently. Instead, we tend to listen to our own echo chambers.

Church denominations are a great exam



Fred Keller, founder of Cascade Engineering, has served on the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, as well as many community and business organizations.

ple of echo chambers. Political parties have developed a highly refined system of echo chambers. News media have joined in. Echo chambers have been getting stronger in the last several years through technologies such as Facebook and Twitter. We connect with those who think like we do. Religions have long been at odds with each other and have gone to war, led crusades and created chaos rather than accepting differences as interesting and potentially productive. What is it about our feelings that we cannot rest until the whole world is just like us?

I think of my own faith background. As Christians, can we not believe that we find salvation through Christ without condemning other religions that believe differently? It seems that it is the exclusivity that many religions have that drives most disputes and makes people willing to die or even to kill in order to defend their way of thinking.

What is it about thinking that our way is the only way that causes so much world strife? Having so many different faith communities is a testimony of why we have differences: We want to be with people we know and admire and trust.

Yet I would propose that the thriving of the human spirit depends on how we deal

with those who are different from us. We must learn to move along the continuum from tolerating each other to genuinely appreciating differences and desiring to learn about and support those differences.

As a Methodist, I carry around a little piece of paper that suggests a universal truth for me. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, suggested that we all have one objective: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

DIFFERENCES AS SOURCE OF STRENGTH

It was Eboo Patel who said, "To see the other side, to defend another people, not despite your tradition, but because of it, is the heart of pluralism." And while assuring the thriving of the human spirit for all seems daunting, it was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who said: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

What if the interfaith community were to demonstrate that differences could actually be a source of strength?

What if the interfaith community were to demonstrate that it is our differences that help us think through our own positions and help us understand how we can become better in our own lives because we now understand how we look to others?

What if the interfaith community came together to demonstrate to the world how differences can actually lead to peace?

What would it take for the interfaith

community to demonstrate the oneness of human kind? Could we actually do a demonstration of this in our own communities? What would that look like?

Would it be starting with deep dialogue about the issues facing each faith practice? Would it be describing the issues of the community through a lens of our faith?

Could we step by step describe the differences between religions and deeply understand them and admire them and appreciate them and celebrate them? And could we then determine which of these differences were actually strengths in disguise? That the differences we thought were hurtful are beautiful ways to express similar principles?

Could we then get down to the serious few differences and have really good dialogue about them? And could we agree that the differences are major, that we may never agree, but we can always appreciate and support each other as we aspire together to have a world where these differences are admired, not hated; are supported, not torpedoed; understood, not misrepresented?

Would the human spirit have an opportunity to soar? Would the world be a better place?

Lots of questions; lots to ponder at this time of Thanksgiving. We have so much for which to be grateful.

And we have so much we can do to advance the thriving of the human spirit.

As the saying goes, if not now, when? And if not us, then who?

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