

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Improvisation is important in the drama of living



Doug Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

While in Cambridge, I had a stimulating talk with David Ford, the previous Regius Professor of Divinity at the university. He was also my mentor/supervisor when I spent seven months there in 2013 as a visiting fellow at the Cambridge Interfaith Programme.

We talked as we walked from his home to the nearby village of Grantchester, along a path following the Cam River. Some of you might remember when he came to Grand Rapids in 2014 to participate in some of the Kaufman Institute activities. He is busier than ever in his retirement and had just returned from a visiting appointment at Emory University.

His latest book, "The Drama of Living," provides insights into seeing life in terms of the merging of characters and plot of a drama. It is not the carefully scripted plot of a TV soap opera, but, Ford writes, "we are in unscripted time. It is necessary to make a decision with no certain outcome. ... Without a ready-made script, we have to improvise."

TRUE IN THE WORLD AT LARGE

This is the case in the larger world scene as well as in our individual lives. In a nation, a city, a school or organization, each decision plays into the drama. It makes a difference what we decide and how we vote. The same is true in the drama of organizations and in our personal lives.

Ford discusses how organizations make decisions on whom to hire by considering job description, resumes, references and interviews:

"Nowadays, human resources professionals sometimes try to reduce the room for disagreements by rigidly defining criteria and procedures. They are above all out to reduce risk and increase control. The result is that they try to script the process in advance, reducing the opportunity for improvisation, whether good or bad. ... It claims a sort of 'objectivity' or 'neutrality,' which on closer examination often turns out to be deeply biased toward a particular set of debatable values, judgments, and ways of exercising power."

I recall a recent discussion with a very successful administrator who was critical of the overemphasis on strategic planning. One can spend too much time on making detailed plans while missing the opportunities and unplanned possibilities that present themselves. In the desire for a tightly controlled script, the drama of opportunity is missed. Control rules out improvisation and judgment.

Ford discusses the role and differences of the right and left brain with the fear that "in our civilization, the left has become inappropriately dominant. The left emphasizes control, certainty, routine, calculation, detachment, practical usefulness and technical manipulations. These are valuable, but are dangerous when they take over and downgrade the right brain's capacity for seeing the whole, engaging directly with the complexity of experience, feeling empathy, attending to the body and

its senses, and appreciating metaphor, ambiguity, depth, creativity, nature, culture, and religion."

While such control has certain advantages, it can also squeeze out such elements as judgment, "gut-feelings" and improvisation.

When we consider the complexities of even our economic system, it is no wonder that a totally managed economy could not compete with the freedom and decentralized decision-making of a market economy. How much more is this true in larger systems such as in the political world?

It is sometimes more efficient when the control is in the hands of one person, but we know all too well the dangers of corruption and even cruelty that comes with a strong dictator. As messy and inefficient as our democracy seems to be, it has built in a mechanism for correction and the limits of power for any one person or branch of government. Churchill once remarked that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried.

When considering religion, it is also dangerous when there is too much control. The benefit of religious freedom is also to prevent the control that easily leads to misuse, persecution and even cruelty or death. If one desires religious freedom for oneself, then it is vital to defend religious freedom for others who do not share one's religious beliefs.

WHAT IS THE OVERARCHING THEME?

Thinking about one's life as a drama is very appealing. There is, of course, a timeline with various dates marking birth, graduation, marriage, etc., and finally death.

But are there more than just dates and events? Is there an overarching theme? Is one's life a narrative with meaning? Does life come together as a drama with themes and commitments that make sense of the joys as well as the sorrows? For me, it is through my faith and spiritual journey that my narrative takes its meaning and forms its dramatic structure.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that planning, control, routine and systems have no place. They are all important in our organizations and our personal lives. Let's just be sure that they do not drive out the innovation, judgment and improvisation that brings meaning to the drama that we all live.

Ford cites poetry and jazz for examples of where structure and improvisation work together to bring new insights and beauty beyond a rigid fixed prescribed format.

Eugene Peterson, clergyman and author, makes a similar point about music and art. "Musicians mix and give rhythm to various sounds ... and create participation in and responsiveness to what we do not have words for. Artists make us insiders to the complexity and beauty of what we deal with every day but so often miss."

Let each of our personal lives, as well as the organizations and causes we serve, be seen in this context of drama — drama that includes the improvisation in art, music and poetry that brings meaning and purpose.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

The left brain emphasizes control, certainty, routine, calculation, detachment, practical usefulness and technical manipulations. While such control has certain advantages, it can also squeeze out such elements as judgment, "gut-feelings" and improvisation.