

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Finding optimism for the future in a fractured world



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How can we remain optimistic in facing the challenges of today?

The college students who wrote the past three Insights gave me optimism for the future. They agreed to share the talks they gave at this year's Abrahamic Dinner while I was in Morocco and Jordan. I was attending the concluding workshop and conference for the three-year grant the Kaufman Interfaith Institute received to explore an interfaith approach to issues in science and religion. The students' insight, commitment and hope expressed an optimism as the next generation reflected on their own interfaith experience engaging people from various faith traditions.

While on the road, I also read the June 20 column by David Brooks on optimism reflecting on the experience of an earlier generation. He wrote about his Jewish grandfather growing up in Lower East Side Manhattan and the poor living conditions in this part of New York City. However, he describes his family's story as "a social mobility miracle."

He writes, "When you grow up with this background, you have a deep sense of the goodness and purpose of America. America is the land of milk and honey. Lincoln could go from a log cabin to the White House. A Jewish boy from the Bronx named Ralph Lifshitz could grow up to become Ralph Lauren and redefine American preppy. You could be born on the fringes and assimilate into this new thing called an American."

Brooks questions whether this story of American opportunity exists in the 21st century given the divisions and radical separations in today's society. There is no single majority.

He writes, "The reality and challenge is that America has become radically pluralistic. We used to be unipolar — one dominant majority culture and a lot of minority groups that defined themselves against it. Now we're multipolar. We're all minorities now."

LEARNING FROM JEREMIAH

The challenge is whether we can learn to be "minorities together," or could we become a society of what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks described as "creative minorities."

In a 2013 lecture, Sacks recounts the prophet Jeremiah addressing his people, who had been defeated and taken captive to Babylon following the destruction of the temple. Jeremiah tells them that they do not need to assimilate or withdraw. They can be true to their faith and build community without trying to be dominant.

Jeremiah wrote: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer. 29:5-7)

Jeremiah's charge to the Jews is to be a "creative minority" in spite of being in exile. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile." The challenge for us today is to build a society made up of creative minorities. We no longer seek a uniform "melting pot" where we all look, think and act alike. Our emerging society is best described as a symphony where each instrument contributes a different sound and different notes to the resulting whole.

Or think of a potluck dinner where people bring different dishes special to



As "creative minorities," life is like a potluck meal. We each have a distinct part to play or a special dish to pass. The result is a more interesting gathering and menu. *Advance Local files*

Local files

their own culture and tradition. The result is a more interesting gathering and menu. We each have a distinct part to play or a special dish to pass. The joy and delight is in the variety of ways we contribute to the whole. In the terms of Jeremiah's charge, as we seek the "peace and prosperity" of the whole, and as it prospers, each contributor will prosper as well.

As Sacks challenges us, "What Jeremiah was saying was that it is possible to survive in exile with your identity intact, your appetite for life undiminished, while contributing to the wider society and praying to God on its behalf. Jeremiah was introducing into history a highly consequential idea: the idea of a creative minority."

Certainly in Europe and increasingly in America, secularization can be a threat to all religious communities. How do faith communities respond as minorities? Sacks describes a number of possibilities. First, one can accommodate to secularism and not take seriously one's faith. Second, one can resist, "sometimes violently, as religiously extremist groups are doing in many parts of the world today." Third, one can "withdraw into protected enclaves, much as we see happening in certain groups within Orthodox Judaism."

But a fourth possibility is "to become a creative minority," Sacks asserts, although adding, "(it) is not easy, because it involves maintaining strong links with the outside world while staying true to your faith, seeking not merely to keep the sacred flame burning but also to transform the larger society of which you are a part."

Sacks finds the diversity among humankind as a part of God's plan. After all, he writes, "God, who created biodiversity, cares for human diversity." It is part of the story of Babel in Genesis, when God scattered the people over the face of the earth. In the Quran, the theme of diversity is taught in the verse, "O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another." (Quran 49:13)

Sacks' call to embrace the status of a creative minority includes "a willingness to be true to our tradition without seeking to impose it on others or judging others harshly because their way is not ours." This must combine our individual loyalties with a humility that seeks the well-being of others regardless of their faith commitments. Sacks writes, "it embodies a truth we all too often forget: that if you are deeply loyal to your faith, you can respect the loyalty with which others stay loyal to theirs."

Just as the college students gave me optimism for the future, so Brooks looks to the future and challenges us to build "a multicultural democracy, a society that has no dominant center but is a collection of creative minorities." It is the hope and optimism needed in today's world.

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