

KAUFMAN INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP DINNER
KEYNOTE ADDRESS
"An Evolution of Consciousness;
Interfaith: The Missing Link"

Mayor George K. Heartwell
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It is a wonderful honor to be invited to deliver the address for this annual Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Dinner. And even more so given the honorees this evening: Lillian Sigal, Marchiene Rienstra and Ghazala Munir. At one time or another, singly or collectively, these powerful women have come into my life bringing their light, erudition and the warmth of their love. Conscious of it or not, each has played her role in shaping my understanding of the world, my acceptance and appreciation of faith traditions other than my own, and my awareness of a realm of spirit beyond the reality of my daily life. And if each of you has had such an impact on this one soul then you have surely had impact on countless other souls. I am deeply grateful for having sojourned for a time with each of you.

While expressing gratitude let me not forget Sylvia and Richard Kaufman and Dr. Doug Kindschi. The work being done through the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University is extraordinary. The year of Interfaith Understanding, coordinated by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute has had a lasting impact on our city.

In the spring of 2013, I was invited to deliver the Commencement address at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and, meeting with faculty prior to the Commencement Ceremony all they wanted to talk about was the Year of Interfaith Understanding in Grand Rapids and how it might be replicated in Louisville.

This year the Kaufman Institute has followed up with the Year of Interfaith Service. Having come to better understand and appreciate each other's traditions we have put our shoulders together, ignoring faith differences, to help those in need. People of many faiths are working together building Habitat for Humanity homes and serving hungry families through our pantry network. And isn't it true that, when faced with crying human need, doctrine and language, differences in prayer style, even what name we use to call on the Almighty, fade to insignificance. Service is the best expression of interfaith.

And so, let me build on that theme for a few minutes this evening.

Story from Desert Fathers, a monastic Christian community from the third century:

Abba Doulas, the disciple of Abba Bessarion said, 'One day when we were walking beside the sea I was thirsty and I said to Abba Bessarion, "Father, I am very thirsty." He said a prayer and said to me, "Drink some of the sea water." The water proved sweet when I drank some. I even poured some into a leather bottle for fear of being thirsty later on. Seeing this, the old man asked me why I was taking some. I said to him, "Forgive me, it is for fear of being thirsty later on." Then the old man said, "God is here, God is everywhere." '

God is here, God is everywhere.

God the Author of creation, the Original Source, the Substance of which we are made and the

Maker of our substance is in everything and is everything. If that sounds heretical – Pantheistic or Panentheistic – I plead guilty as charged...and I remain utterly unrepentant. For if 'God is here, and God is everywhere', if God is everything and in everything then there is no distinction between Theisms, no rank ordering of truths, no one-size-MUST-fit-all, and surely no one-and-only-one right path to God.

I have been deeply influenced in recent years by the work of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard, a Jesuit Priest trained in botany, wrote in the tumultuous aftermath of the voyage of the Beagle and the development by Charles Darwin of the theory of natural selection. Teilhard described an evolution of consciousness that takes place in what he called the Noosphere, the region where matter and mind unite and evolve, moving ever toward a perfect unity in the mind of God. His important work *The Phenomenon of Man* starts with a description of the causal event that brought matter into existence. Everything that would ever be came into being in that event billions of years ago; all the gases, the chemicals, the solid matter that would evolve into water and air, land and life forms. Every subsequent stage in the evolution of matter consists of the organization of the original material of the Universe into ever-more complex arrangements. So, too, out of matter evolved thought and thought became particularized by culture and geography. Yet, all thought is rising toward a maximum level of complexity that Teilhard called the Omega Point. I understand the Omega Point as the perfect mind of God, the ultimate purpose of the universe, and the climax of history.

So what does this have to do with interfaith dialogue and service?

This evolution in the complexity of consciousness toward the Omega Point requires different expressions of thought, different modes of consciousness interacting, intersecting, and each being subtly changed by the interaction; moving to a higher level of consciousness...beyond the complexity of each expression's individual consciousness...closer to the universal consciousness which is the mind of God and the purpose of all evolution. When I bring my Christian understanding of God's nature together with Marchiene's different Christian understanding or Lillian's Jewish understanding or Ghazala's Muslim understanding – and if we're honest and open and truly interested in growing – then what will emerge is a stronger understanding, a richer understanding, and a more perfect understanding.

Seeking to know God through the diversity of religious expression leads us, ultimately, to a place of maximum comprehension of God's infinitely complex nature. Through that experience of knowing God more fully, we evolve in consciousness toward the Omega Point.

We do not consciously will this evolution any more than the one cell organism willed itself to evolve into a more complex life form. We simply meet a person of a faith tradition different from our own, experience her as a full and interesting human being, and we are gently drawn into a relationship. Perhaps it starts with curiosity. Perhaps with shared interests. We experience this wonderful friend as wise, kind, faithful, and loyal and we can no more dismiss her deep faith commitment than could we imagine life without her friendship.

Service is an arena where these meetings occur and these friendships develop. Working side by side with another, first I understand that we share the same objective: caring for the poor and marginalized. Second, I see that we can laugh together over little things that

happen, little things we say. Next I learn about you, your family, your work life, the things that matter to you; and I share the same information about myself. The breakthrough happens when we experience shared pain, when we weep together over a disappointment or loss. Now you have become fully human to me and I to you. The last thing that happens is we talk about our faith. The differences are almost – almost – irrelevant; for we have experienced this other person already as an expression of God's love. So these new friends – Jew and Hindu, Muslim and Christian, Sikh and Buddhist – evolve in their understanding, drawing closer to the universal nature of God in whom all history finds its apotheosis and all faith finds its home.

And – don't you see? – this is the fulfillment of history, the purpose of life, the meaning and climax of the Universe.

Maybe you didn't know when you showed up to a Habitat Interfaith Build that you would be part of fulfilling the ultimate design of the compassionate universe, bringing about the conditions leading to the Omega Point. Maybe you did it simply because you care about poorly housed families and you thought it would be interesting to meet a Muslim or to work with a Christian. But the power – the miracle! – is hidden in the interaction, waiting to be discovered and cultivated; pregnant with the wonder to change the world.

Interfaith understanding and co-service are the preconditions in an evolution of consciousness that God foreknew in that original causal event. What is happening in this room tonight – what is happening all over this city through the work of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute – is nothing less than the climax of history, the bending of the Universe toward unity in the mind of God.