

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Promoting belonging in this political moment

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In an article by John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez, “The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging,” they propose, “As we transition through political and economic realignments, we also go through a remaking of ourselves.”

This shifting in identity — both individual and group — has the danger of further distinguishing and dividing us based on our differences. Whether it is political and ideological values, or ethnic and religious identities, these differences can either lead to a deeper division or a more united diversity.

The desire for separating ourselves from one another makes sense. Human beings have a natural tendency to distinguish groups from one another using categories that include some and separate out others.

But, as Powell and Menéndez point out, these categorical boundaries do not remain only in our minds and in-groups, but manifest in our actions and thus the world. Categories affect our behavior, inform our decisions, and lead to stereotypes, discrimination and group-based inequalities.

So when it is human nature to con-

struct opposing and othering identities and groups, how can we resist the tendency? During this transformative political time, as we are remaking ourselves and defining who is a part of “We the People,” how can we offer inclusive alternatives that honor one another and create a culture of belonging?

While some responses to diversity are segregation, secession and assimilation, Powell and Menéndez propose that the alternative to these ultimately unproductive strategies is promoting a sense of belonging through expanding the circle of human concern. This goes beyond “tolerating and respecting difference but to ensuring that all people are welcome and feel that they belong in society,” write Powell and Menéndez, directors of the Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California, Berkeley.

One of my interfaith heroes who expanded the circle of human concern is Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, which brought together communities through houses of hospitality.

In creating a movement meant to be a revolutionary force to change the social order, Day’s aim was to “try to make that kind of a society in which it is easier for people to be good.”

Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration

Theme: Coming Together: Welcoming All

When: 7-8:30 p.m., Monday

Location: Central Reformed Church, 10 College Ave NE, Grand Rapids

Cost: Free

Information: interfaithunderstanding.org

I would go further to suggest that new, inclusive categories and structures should not only make it easier to be good to one another, but also to see one another’s pain, to feel empathy for one another, and to engage in action on behalf of one another.

As Powell and Menéndez conclude, “the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership.” With inclusive categories and structures also come inclusive narratives that support us all. By reframing our individual and group identities in a way that unites rather than divides, we also reject the narratives that pit us

against others.

These narratives that divide and create othering have dominated our society for most of history. We must work diligently and collectively, to uncover and promote the narratives that seek to unite and create belonging.

Policies and rhetoric have the potential to deny personhood and humanity or to grant full membership and participation in society.

The most important thing for us moving forward — all of us, regardless of political affiliation or religious beliefs — is to ensure that all people are able to fully participate and feel a sense of belonging in our country that is meant for all.

During this presidential campaign season and election, we saw that this expanded circle of human concern and belonging does not exist in our society, at least not yet. In remaking ourselves and our communities in the wake of this political moment, let us take into consideration the poetic words of Edwina Markham:

“He drew a circle that shut me out — here, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him in!”

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