

Seek common good through personal relationships



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How do we encounter increasing polarization in society and in ourselves?

Rabbi Jack Moline is the president of the Interfaith Alliance and Rabbi Emeritus of Agudas Achim Congregation in Alexandria, Virginia, where he served for 27 years. I heard him speak at a workshop sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations on religion and foreign policy. As a conservative rabbi, he has become a powerful national voice for religious freedom for all, regardless of faith or beliefs. The Jewish rabbinic tradition holds that humans have two inclinations, one to good and the other to evil. But noting that evil cannot be redeemed but only destroyed, Moline proposed instead the contrast between altruism and selfishness. Selfishness, he asserted, can be changed and redeemed.

The key is the affirmation of love, which is taught by all of the religious traditions. The first step is the act of invitation: inviting into conversation the person who may seem to be the stranger or the person with whom you totally disagree. It is by conversation that we can move toward seeking the common good. As long as we stay in our isolated echo chambers and fail to reach out to someone who believes differently, either in terms of religion or in politics, we will never move to the common good. It is in brave acts of conscience that we can find the common ground that will enable us to change attitudes, values and even laws.

These brave acts are not likely to come from our politicians, who are reluctant to make bold statements that could alienate their base. The point was made that politics is “downstream from culture.” Or as one of the panelists put it, “Politicians look for a parade and then try to get in front of it.” There are notable exceptions, but in general this is a reliable maxim.

Significant change toward the common good must come

from our basic values, and it is the religions that perpetuate and form our values. In my years of interfaith work I have been privileged to not only learn about the many differences between the religious stories and differing truth claims, but to also learn about the essential agreement on basic values. I have especially learned this by developing personal relationships with people from very different cultures and religious perspectives. We don’t have to agree on everything in order to learn from each other. In fact, it can be argued that we will never learn if we only interact with people with whom we agree. That will only solidify our attitudes and prejudices.

Without personal relationships, all you have are categories. When I put someone in a category, I learn nothing, but merely reinforce a limited and probably inaccurate stereotype. It is such stereotypes that then lead to discrimination and prejudice. It is when we encounter people in a personal relationship that we open ourselves to being informed and even change. Of course, in the process, the other person is also opening to change. In such encounters we have the opportunity to find ways to promote the common good.

Whether it is an inclination to good vs. evil or altruism vs. selfishness, we can make the decision to be open to new ideas, new experiences and new encounters with those we might be tempted to see as “other” or as just a category.

The easy route is to just stay in our own ways and not take up the challenge. But each decision we make is taking us down the road to a more isolated and ultimately selfish perspective — or to a larger world of ideas and the potential to achieve the common good.

I am reminded of the story of the old Cherokee chief who was teaching his grandson about life. He told the boy that we are all born with two wolves within us, and there is a terrible fight going on between these two wolves. One wolf is evil, prone to anger, envy, greed and selfishness. The other

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is good and seeks peace, love, kindness, generosity, compassion, humility and faith.

The chief tells his grandson that the same fight is going on inside you and every person. After thinking about it for a while the grandson finally asks his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

To which the old chief simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Whether it is the rabbinic scholars or the Native American chief, we must face the choice we all have as we go through life. Are we feeding the inclination to do good, encountering the other and seeking peace? Let’s make this our commitment in the days ahead — our choice will either bring more polarization or move us toward the common good. Let us feed the good inclination as we encounter those not like us.

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