

[00:00:00.38] TORAL PATEL: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees. On today's show, we continue our conversation with Oliver Goodrich, Associate Dean of Spirituality and Meaning Making, and the director of Cornell United Religious Work. We go in-depth on how spirituality, religion, and faith can guide us through current issues related to social injustices and COVID-19. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:29.97] ANTHONY SIS: My name's Anthony Sis

[00:00:31.20] TORAL PATEL: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:33.71] [THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:59.39] ANTHONY SIS: Oliver, super-happy to have you back for this second part of the topic on spirituality, on faith, and on religion. So as we reflect and get near to the end of 2020, there's been a lot going on in this country. There's a lot going on in the world, especially regarding COVID-19 and social injustices generally speaking. And we started talking about this a little bit in the first part, but what do you see the role of religion, spirituality, and faith in guiding folks through this moment?

[00:01:31.38] OLIVER GOODRICH: It's a challenging question to answer, Anthony, because part of the difficulty of this moment is that we don't have access to the same social spaces that we had six months ago. So I would love to give you some big answer about people gathering together in their congregations and their mosques and their synagogues and their churches, and talking about these issues. But the reality is, people can't gather. It's not safe to gather in a lot of houses of worship right now. So people are having to adapt and have this conversation in virtual spaces or one on one.

[00:02:03.35] I do believe that religion can and should have a lot to say about this. And let's be clear. Religion has been a part of some of the problems, and I think can be a part of some of the solutions to the particular things we're talking about.

[00:02:18.56] Religion has fueled racist ideology, and religion can be a part of anti-racism. I think both of those things are true. And that's a complicated thing for me to acknowledge in the work that I do, but it's true.

[00:02:31.29] I think one of the things that we're beginning to talk about, for example, in CURW with the chaplains that I work with at Cornell, is how can religious leaders open up spaces where we can talk about those things that we would prefer not to talk about, like religion and politics? We talked about this in the last episode. And it's tough. It's difficult for us to open up those spaces and talk about things that we would prefer not to. And I think it really requires us to live into and practice some spiritual practices.

[00:03:05.12] I tend to think about spirituality along the lines of posture. Like, a spiritual director I used to work with invited me to think about our-- when we think about our

heart and our energy and life force, and some of those things we talked about spirituality, meaning in the last episode, to think about what's a posture that represents how my spirit is oriented to these things. And I think about what it means for us to try to have a posture of openness toward difficult conversations, as opposed to a posture of, like-- listeners can't see me.

[00:03:35.75] But I'm, like, crossing my arms, and having a little bit of like a closed in body posture, because that's how a lot of us feel toward these difficult subjects. We prefer to turn away from them. And I think there can be an invitation for us to turn toward them, as difficult as that might be. It really requires some deep spiritual work for us to turn toward these difficult topics.

[00:03:56.69] ANTHONY SIS: So I'm curious. You said posture, and how looking at spirituality is, like, different postures that consist of spirituality. What exactly does that mean?

[00:04:07.80] I'd be curious to learn more about your perspective on that, and how it ties to some of the things you mentioned around racism, anti-racism, other social injustices that are happening, both in the US as well as internationally? Because there's a lot. There's a lot that is happening internationally, too. And I think just reminding our listeners that there are things that aren't happening in the US that are happening in other countries that also affect us and how we operate in this country as well, right?

[00:04:33.31] OLIVER GOODRICH: Yeah, it's great. So I talked briefly in the last episode a little bit about how I understand spirituality and what it means to me. And I try to talk about this idea of not seeing spiritual or spirituality as just a good thing.

[00:04:46.53] Some of us use the term spirituality and think, oh, I'm such a spiritual person or I strive to be. And what they mean is, like, I'm good or I'm peaceful, or only this positive understanding of spirituality. And I try to use it as a neutral term to just help us access and reflect what is the orientation of our spirit. And I have this understanding of spirit as our energy or our life force-- the things that animate us.

[00:05:12.62] So part of that is about attitudes. Part of it is about postures. And it ultimately leads us to take action. Like, our spirit is what animates us. That would be another sentiment that people use.

[00:05:23.10] So when I think about postures, I think about inviting people-- I'm thinking about my work as a spiritual director. It's inviting people to recognize the thoughts or the emotions that are energizing them in their interior life, and to think about how that corresponds to an external posture, which sometimes gives us a clue to our action. If I'm feeling really closed off to, or angry about or sad about racism, a posture for that might be this, like, clenched fists or arms crossed, or an inward turning kind of posture.

[00:06:00.50] But there could be a way to think about-- once I'm aware that that's how my spirit is feeling about it, to then sit with it and try to understand, and think through

how I could open up my physical posture, which sometimes leads to a corresponding shift in our spirit and our energy in the way that we choose to live in the world. I don't know if that gives you a concrete answer, Anthony. But that's a little bit about my thinking and how I work with this when I'm doing spiritual direction, for example.

[00:06:25.70] TORAL PATEL: So Oliver, you mentioned something earlier when you first started talking in this part, is that people are just really scared to talk about their spirituality and faith in religion. Why do you think that is?

[00:06:37.50] OLIVER GOODRICH: What comes to mind, Toral, is, I referenced Eboo Patel in our last conversation. And he's been a really influential person on my own thinking about religion and spirituality. He's a Muslim man and leads this amazing interfaith organization, the Interfaith Youth Core.

[00:06:55.67] And one of the things he talks about-- and he's riffing a little bit here on Diana Eck, who leads the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. But Eboo says that difference is a fact, but pluralism is an achievement. And I think that cracks open something that I observed today, which is that we talk about diversity and we talk about difference a lot, and we put a high value on those things.

[00:07:19.02] But the reality is, people are scared to be different right now. And I think the fear that you reference is this discomfort that we have with a culture that has people from all kinds of different religions and different cultures and different sexual orientations and gender expressions. I think at some level, our human response when we encounter difference-- maybe this is learned. I don't know the answer to this, actually. But I think there's a way in which we can be a little bit scared when we encounter something that's different than our own experience.

[00:07:50.99] But I also think that if that is learned, we can unlearn that. I think there are ways in which we can learn to practice a sense of generosity and openness-- you used the word openness earlier, toward what it means to encounter someone who's different. And I think if we're ever going to get to a place where we embrace pluralism, and really in a positive sense can move past difference to find connection across our difference, that it requires us to approach it with what I would call a spiritual posture of openness and hospitality-- and a willingness to push through some of the discomfort into a space that is far more generous and productive. Does that make sense?

[00:08:28.40] TORAL PATEL: Yes, it does.

[00:08:29.40] ANTHONY SIS: And Oliver, just for our listeners who maybe [? already are ?] familiar with the term pluralism, how would you define pluralism?

[00:08:35.57] OLIVER GOODRICH: Pluralism points us in the direction of a more intentional kind of engagement. Not an erasure of difference, but an embracing of our particularities and our particular differences in a way that they can be complementary,

and that they can coexist. I used the analogy-- I can't remember if it was last time or this time, sorry, about the melting pot--

[00:08:57.53] TORAL PATEL: Last time.

[00:08:58.22] OLIVER GOODRICH: --was it last time or this time. I used the analogy in our last conversation about America being a melting pot. And it was Eboo Patel himself who suggested a different metaphor-- this idea of a potluck or a buffet. That we don't embrace our differences, but we celebrate them. We bring them to the table.

[00:09:16.10] And I grew up in a Baptist church that loved a good potluck dinner. That was a thing we were known for. And a potluck in northern Maine, where I grew up probably looks a little bit different than a potluck in Ithaca or a potluck in New York City, or Bombay or some other place. But there's a way in which, when we can celebrate our particular identities and experiences, and fully bring them to our table, we move beyond just tolerating differences into an altogether different qualitative kind of space that I hope would be what we talk about, or strive to, when we talk about pluralism.

[00:09:50.63] TORAL PATEL: And to Anthony's point, from our previous conversation, that's what's going to really lead to the true inclusionary. And so if you bring that into a work context, as when people are able to bring their true self to work every day, it's going to lead to that inclusion piece that we're working so hard to achieve.

[00:10:06.94] ANTHONY SIS: Oliver, one of the things, I think, it would be remiss to not talk about-- or I guess not do, to basically just acknowledge the racial injustice and the racial awakening as you mentioned in our last episode that is happening in this country specifically in everything that is happening right now with this awakening, and the ties and just the connection to spirituality, faith, religion. You talked a little bit about it at the start of this episode. But I think about it from a spirituality context, what is the intersection there? What does that look like?

[00:10:38.98] OLIVER GOODRICH: Well, a couple of different things come to mind. I think about how, with regard to racism in particular, if we want to focus on that, spirituality, I think, has been part of what has allowed racism to flourish in this country. And spirituality could be part of the solution.

[00:10:56.30] So this is part of why I use a neutral definition of spirituality, and not just use spirituality as a synonym for, like, good or peaceful things. Because I truly believe that part of what has been on display in this twin pandemic of the coronavirus and the racial injustice that we're seeing on display has been centuries of greed and pride and superiority, and all of these things, that I would say are spiritual problems at their core. It's all of those things that have worked together to allow a system where white people are in the majority, and people of color are being systematically oppressed, and are experiencing disparities of access to health care and property ownership, and earning potential and education, and so many things that we could go on and on and say.

[00:11:53.92] And I think we have to be clear that religion, and particularly Christianity, has been a part of creating narratives that have allowed one group of people to be subjugated to another group of people. And as a Christian, that's a really painful thing to admit. But until we can be clear about how that's happened-- and I'm not a scholar in this area.

[00:12:11.87] But I can tell you in my own reading, and in hearing scholars who speak about the history and have researched the history of this, it's clear that there's a connection there. And at the same time, I believe that spirituality can be part of the solution. If people are willing to do the hard work to confront their realities, to face their own personal involvement in these systems, and their personal agency in possibly changing them, if that can happen, there can be a real change of these systems. We have the power to shape the world that we live in. And a changed spiritual posture could bring about change in the world.

[00:12:48.20] And I don't want to be naive to that. I realize that what I'm saying is high and lofty and is an aspiration. But I very much believe that religious spaces and personal spiritual practices can be part of the solution here. Am I getting at the spirit of your question, Anthony?

[00:13:04.60] ANTHONY SIS: Definitely. And I think for me, it's one of those things that it's in tandem with other elements, in terms of thinking about, like, activism, and looking at activism maybe as a posture. I mean, I don't know if that would be appropriate to say. But I think looking at some of the ways in which solutions to these issues are currently being addressed as a spiritual approach, I wonder if there's any kind of added value, or ways in which we could look at it from a different perspective from a spiritual one.

[00:13:35.30] And I think particularly in the work that I did-- especially when I think back to my undergrad days, I wouldn't consider myself an activist now. But when I was an undergrad I think I had a lot of activist roots. And for me, a lot of what I did, doing protests, during die-ins, for certain causes to really address some of these injustices around different issues, I never considered as a spiritual posture.

[00:13:58.58] But I think in many ways, me engaging in that was a way for me to elevate myself, and also my commitment to addressing this injustice. To say I'm willing to put my body on the line for those who cannot-- who cannot advocate for themselves. And because I have the ability to do so, I'm going to do that. And so I think for me, what really resonated for me in your response is viewing even that practice as like a posture, or doing the education, or like you said doing that internal work as a spiritual posture to be a part of the solution-- even at an individual level. And even if we're surrounded by members of our family or our friends who might disagree with us, that in and of itself can still be a part of the solution.

[00:14:41.40] OLIVER GOODRICH: Yeah, you totally get it, Anthony. I love the way that you put that. What comes to mind for me is, I'm part of a couple of national networks of people who work broadly in spiritual life and spiritual care. And one of the new

movements that's come about over the last 10 to 20 years is, maybe back in the '80s or '70s, or way back in the 20th century, people would think about chaplains as people who, like, come to hospice or come to a hospital. And they provide spiritual care in a moment of personal crisis-- particularly a health crisis.

[00:15:13.92] But there's this new movement that's emerged around chaplains being on the front lines of activist movements. It's called movement chaplaincy. And people who are seeing the spiritual care they're providing not as being an issue of life or death in the hospital bed, but actually being an issue of life or death on the front lines of some of these movements.

[00:15:32.01] I think of someone like Patrisse Cullors, one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. I have a quote here that I'll share with you of hers. I think she really speaks to the spirituality of activism. She says-- this is from an interview she did on another podcast, on the On Being podcast with Krista Tippett.

[00:15:50.88] She says, "I mean, to be honest with you, so many of us in the Black Lives Matter movement have either been pushed out of the church, because many of us are queer and out. But that hasn't stopped us from being deeply spiritual in this work. And I think for us that looks like healing justice work.

[00:16:08.58] I believe that this work of Black Lives Matter is actually healing work. It's not just about policy. It's why, I think, some people get so confused by us.

[00:16:20.01] They're like, where's the policy? I'm like, you can't policy your racism away. We no longer have Jim Crow laws, but we still have Jim Crow hate."

[00:16:31.68] I mean, she says so much in that quote. But I think she really gets to this piece about part of the value of the movement is about effecting policy change and changing the culture. But there's a deeper level underneath that, where they're doing some of the spiritual work, so that people aren't approaching these difficult topics with a posture of hate or of-- I don't even have the right words.

[00:16:54.15] But they're approaching it with a posture that would be about creative solutions and about healing. She uses this word healing justice. And it really captures the spirituality of what activism can be, and I think aspires to be.

[00:17:08.64] TORAL PATEL: So in everything that we're talking about, that speaks to the people who are ready to move with this open posture. But my question is more towards related to the people who are not ready-- who are still holding on to this old, powerful belief of this side or that side, or it's one belief or the other, me versus you philosophy. How do we speak to those individuals?

[00:17:36.93] OLIVER GOODRICH: OK, so two thoughts here. One is that I might offer a different perspective from the one that you just shared, Toral, to say that I'm not sure anybody is ever totally ready. We might have a very small segment of the population

that's raring to go, ready to charge in there and do the work. But I think those folks are probably a really small minority. I think a lot of us are in a place of we're beginning to get clear about our values and what we might call a conviction.

[00:18:06.78] But there's still something in us that holds us back, or we recognize the risk that's inherent in speaking out or joining a demonstration, or whatever it may be. And there's a spectrum there. We're at different points of readiness along a spectrum. Maybe we would say it that way.

[00:18:22.65] But I think this invites all of us into some spiritual practice. And one spiritual practice, or a couple of different spiritual practices, that might be helpful here, number one, would be just some mindfulness. To pause and to be aware of what's happening inside. You might sense some conflict because on the one hand, you've named some core values that are important. But you also feel some risk because it's costly and it might cost you a job, or it might cost you your reputation if you choose to speak out, and risk judgment or retribution by other people.

[00:18:55.26] So I think if we can be aware that that's happening within us, and not just gloss over it, that actually can be a really generative spiritual practice. So just take the time to even notice and name that that's happening within us. And then I think the other spiritual practice would be about reflection. To take some time, once you've named that, to then reflect a little bit and ask oneself what's going on underneath that. What's really the driving thing?

[00:19:20.58] I would suspect that, for a lot of us underneath it, there's a deeply held fear. I'll name that as a person of relative educational privilege and employment privilege and white Christian privilege. I fear around some of these things. I don't want to say the wrong thing. I don't want to do something that puts my job or my livelihood at risk.

[00:19:41.17] And once I'm able to name that and be clear about that, then I can ask myself what's more important. My fear, or my conviction that this is right, or my care for my coworkers and my neighbors who hold marginalized identities, and a sense of justice about what I want for this country and for our shared world to be. And that's a hard thing to hold. It's a hard reflection to do. But I think these kinds of difficult moments invite us to do that deep spiritual work to really get clear about what's underneath all of this for each of us as individuals.

[00:20:20.60] I also think that if we can do this spiritual practice, and invite ourselves into a space where we're honest with ourselves, and can reflect and be mindful about what's going on, fear is not the only thing. It sometimes is the dominant thing and the loudest thing. I think of-- what was the movie a few years ago, Inside Out, that Disney did, with the named emotions.

[00:20:38.97] Like, fear can be a really, loud, dominant, shaping kind of emotion. It's usually not the only one. And fear can sometimes cloud other things that are really

important to us. Justice and equity aren't necessarily the loudest, sexiest emotions that we feel or spiritual movements. But they're there for many people, or other values that are really core to who a person is and to what animates them in life.

[00:21:05.01] Another tool that I've used with folks in some of the work that I've been doing the last few months that's been helpful is, there's a tool from Solidarity Is, the building movement. I think you've shared this, Anthony, with some of the work that you've done as well. It's a tool that invites people to think about activism or social justice work not as one static or monolithic thing, but to think about the different roles that are involved in a movement for social change.

[00:21:31.32] So I am a person who is a teacher and is a spiritual director, and would like to be a healer. But maybe it's not my strength to be on the front lines, doing activist work that one of my colleagues or neighbors might really excel at. So I think there's an invitation for us to think about, again, underneath the fear what's a particular role that I can play in this larger ecosystem for social change that's unique to me and to the strengths that I have, and to recognize that a movement doesn't have to look like one thing. It takes a village, as the old saying goes. And it's really an invitation for people to think of their unique strengths into this larger movement.

[00:22:10.19] ANTHONY SIS: I want to go back to religion a little bit. And something that we discuss in our conversations for this particular episode, and looking at the international context of social injustices that are happening in addition to COVID-19, but also particularly this rise in fundamentalism that is happening globally. And how does that affect how we engage in spiritual practices?

[00:22:35.94] And then alternatively, how does that then impact the ways in which we view diversity and inclusion? So I think there's a lot that we can unpack there, but I'd be curious to hear from the global perspective and this rise of fundamentalism. So, A, maybe starting off with how we define fundamentalism, or how you define it specifically, and then from there, talking about what are some of the ways in which people are addressing it in the spiritual realm or in the religious community as well.

[00:23:01.94] OLIVER GOODRICH: Oh my gosh, we don't have time in the day. But it's such a worthy topic and a good question. I'll try to take a first attempt at that, Anthony. I mean, I do think internationally, around the world, we see situations where fundamentalism is on the rise. And what I mean, or what I understand, by fundamentalism is a rigid holding on to a particular set of beliefs, principles, or worldview to the exclusion of all others.

[00:23:32.49] I mean, we talked about postures earlier. If we're going to talk about postures, I think of a really clenched fist in the sense of an unwillingness to let go of something, or maybe the image of, like-- is it the ostrich that buries its head in the sand? Like, just doesn't want to acknowledge that there are other things going on in the world around. Or worse, wants to erase those differences, so that their way of seeing the world is the only way of seeing the world.

[00:23:57.62] We can say that this is in an international or a global phenomenon, but it's not unique to other places in the world. This is happening in the US as well. Again, speaking as a Christian, I will say that this is not particularly a Muslim thing or a Jewish thing. This is a Christian thing as well. This is a phenomenon that we see around the world.

[00:24:16.14] And I think part of it is in response to the fact that we are living in an increasingly globalized world. 1,000 or 2,000 years ago, people could grow up in a relatively small community wherever they were in the world, and probably never come into contact with people who saw the world differently than they and their family and their neighbors saw the world. But we live in this global community now. So I have neighbors who celebrated the Jewish high holy days and different neighbors who go to Catholic mass, and other neighbors who pray in even different ways.

[00:24:50.87] So how do we hold all those things together? It's challenging. It requires, I think, deep spiritual work.

[00:24:57.32] So one thing that comes to mind is historically, over the course of the 20th century, for example, a lot of the major movements, and movements of social change and political change, were actually movements that were brought about by interfaith cooperation. Like, people think of a figure like Gandhi, and think of the amazing things that he was able to accomplish. But people forget that he was working in collaboration across lines of religious difference.

[00:25:23.74] We think about Nelson Mandela and the interfaith movement that brought about the end of apartheid in South Africa. We think about Martin Luther King and can forget that he worked alongside Muslim brothers and sisters, Jewish leaders. There's a famous picture of him walking in one of his marches with the Greek Orthodox archbishop Iakovos next to him and Abraham Joshua Heschl, one of the foremost rabbis of the 20th century, walking arm-in-arm, doing this work together across lines of religious difference.

[00:25:53.48] So I do think there's a suggestion or a helpful practice that's hinted to in that. That we have to find-- again, back to something we talked about in our last episode, lines of commonality and shared values that can fuel and motivate our work together for social change. And I do believe interfaith cooperation can be one of the really, really potent ways that we can cooperate on some of these issues. And we do see lots of examples of ways that's happening on a much smaller local level.

[00:26:21.55] But there's challenges to that. It's not easy. It's tough work. It's tough work.

[00:26:25.69] TORAL PATEL: So Oliver, I know that you mentioned the US being more global as human beings across the world as adding to fundamentalism. How do you think the pandemic, COVID-19, has or hasn't impacted fundamentalism?

[00:26:39.59] OLIVER GOODRICH: Many of us-- I won't say all. But I think it's hard to imagine someone going through this pandemic and remote work experience and in quarantine, etc., without feeling some sense of fear or anxiety or unsettledness or disconnection. I think on any given day, I feel all or some of those things. And it's part of the challenge.

[00:27:03.58] In the last episode, we talked about how important connection is and how religion can be a means to fuel our connection. And also it can be a means to fuel our disconnection. But one of the things that we've been talking about in Cornell United Religious Work is this idea that our fates and our lives are integrally bound up with one another's has been a theme that we've returned to time and time again. That our actions have social consequences.

[00:27:30.91] And we can disagree on religious doctrine, and we can disagree on matters of some things and our shared life together. But it's pretty hard to disagree on the fact that our choices have impact on one another. So when I put on a mask and I go out into social space, I am doing that in part to protect myself, but also to protect other people, because I care about my community and I want to care about my neighbor.

[00:27:55.16] And for me, I guess I don't think of it as a spiritual practice. But now that I'm saying this, in some ways, it is a spiritual practice that comes from a desire to want to care for my neighbor. So many of our traditions talk about care for the common good and care for the most vulnerable among us. So I do think that points back to this piece about our human connection and how central that is, and how many times it's been lifted up in the midst of this pandemic.

[00:28:19.68] TORAL PATEL: I think when things are changing around us so much, we tend to hold on to the things that we can as individuals. And so that's why I was thinking that maybe there is a rise of fundamentalism across the board, across the world, because we're holding on to the things that we are able to hold on to. And it just so happens that in the rise of fundamentalism is these ideas.

[00:28:41.50] And some of those are religious based ideas. Others are not. Others can be political and so forth. And so we're just-- I think as individuals, as human beings, because things are so unsettled, that we're holding on to things stronger than I think we ever have.

[00:28:55.87] OLIVER GOODRICH: Totally, and had we had more time for like a third podcast, we could go into this in greater depth. But another line of conversation that's interesting that comes out of your comment, Toral, is this intersection between religion and science, which often are pitted against one another. Like, how can you be a religious person and believe in science? That's the way the narrative takes place.

[00:29:16.96] I have never found that to be a particularly energizing debate to take part in. I don't see them actually as counter toward one another, because my understanding

of religion isn't that it should replace science. I think so much of religion and spirituality and faith are about inviting us to know ourselves in our interior world.

[00:29:34.92] So there's a way in which the scientific approach is about knowing oneself and knowing how one's spirit operates. And that way, in that sense, they're very complementary. And they don't have to be opposed to one another, though there are people who are calling into question science and its value. But I don't I don't know that's particularly helpful.

[00:29:52.89] TORAL PATEL: Yeah I always say, like-- so if you truly believe that God creates everything-- and so for us, that's even hard to believe, because we don't have just one God. So even the person that guides you-- like for us, it's the word G- O- D- stands for generator, operator, destroyer. So the person that creates you, and then there's the one that takes you through your life, and then the one that takes care of you after.

[00:30:12.46] So it's the G- O- D-. So there's three people right there to begin with. And so even if you believe this philosophy that God controls everything that happens, I'm like, well, that includes science to me. I'm like, none of the scientific stuff would happen if God didn't want it to happen. So I agree with you that I don't think it's one or the other.

[00:30:29.62] ANTHONY SIS: So Oliver, as a queer person of color, and as somebody who holds other marginalized identities, thinking about that intersection, I've definitely found myself-- moments during this quarantine, during this pandemic, as well as thinking about all of the racial injustices, social injustices that are happening globally, I've found myself often to have very little hope, very little optimism, from a spiritual context in terms of that things will get better. Because as you mentioned, from a historical piece, these issues have been happening for centuries. And this racial awakening, it's happening now.

[00:31:05.63] But it also happened in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement. And so it's history repeating itself. But I think for a lot of marginalized populations, there has been a significant moment during this period where people have lost hope, have lost optimism, have disengaged in their traditional spiritual practices, because of just everything that is happening around the world, and the fact that people have very little control-- or feel like they have very little control to be able to make change or create change, or find their role in that social change that you were talking about earlier. So for folks who are feeling this way still, or have felt this way at some point, like myself, what would you say to them as a spiritual director to help guide them through that disheartening and this serious sense of hopelessness, I would say?

[00:31:59.58] OLIVER GOODRICH: Thanks for sharing your experience, Anthony. And I would start by saying that I have felt those things too. I have had moments over the past few months where I have felt myself going to a place of hopelessness, and even on the verge of despair.

[00:32:15.02] And those are not particularly comfortable things to feel. We have this cultural, I would call almost, addiction to feeling comfortable and convenient things, and we want happy things. We don't want to feel uncomfortable things.

[00:32:28.02] I mean, I think one thing for us to just be honest about in this space is that there is value that comes with naming even the bad parts of life-- even the bad parts of our emotional experiences, and to name what you did so bravely right now, to say, like, people feel hopeless, I feel hopeless. And probably some of our listeners feel hopeless. I think that becomes a starting point, then, to then open up a bigger view of what's happening in the world, and to see not just the things that reinforce the hopelessness of the despair, but to try to catch glimpses of what else is happening around us.

[00:33:04.21] There's a woman whose perspective has been really helpful and meaningful to me in the midst of this pandemic. Valarie Kaur is her name. She's a Sikh leader and lawyer and an activist. And she's written a new book called See No Stranger. And it's about looking forward to the kind of world that may yet emerge.

[00:33:25.26] She started writing this book before the pandemic, but it took on a new kind of urgency in all of the inequities that have been laid bare over the course of the pandemic. And Valarie uses this really beautiful line. She says, yes we're living in a dark moment. But she says, is it the darkness of the tomb or the darkness of the womb?

[00:33:46.92] And she invites us to think about the ways in which new things are being birthed in the world around us, or to even imagine the possibilities of what yet might emerge from this profoundly difficult situation. And she leans hard into labor metaphors and imagery. And says, when it gets hard-- and labor is hard I understand from my friends who have experienced that.

[00:34:07.14] It's not something I've experienced personally. But you have to breathe, you have to push, you have to work, to get to the beautiful, joyful thing that's on the other side. And so I wouldn't want to minimize anyone's hopelessness or despair.

[00:34:20.58] I would just want to invite them to consider if that's the only thing that's going on, and to invite people to begin to imagine, in the face of the inequities that we've seen, what other possibilities might be out there, and to begin to allow that to stir our imagination to consider how we want the world to be. And then for us to get to do the work-- to get to work about building the world we want to see that's better on the other side of this. Many people have said we can't go back to normal because normal wasn't good.

[00:34:46.41] It wasn't good for everybody. It wasn't fully participatory and fully equitable for everyone. So I think there's an invitation for us to think about how we can build a more just inclusive and equitable world on the other side of this. And for me, that's a hopeful thought.

[00:35:00.18] ANTHONY SIS: And I think the key part in what you just shared, Oliver, too-- and something that I've been sitting with as well is, in that envisioning of a better world, a better future, to think of it without barriers, I think, is really important. Because I think sometimes, when you ask people to think so abstract, they then want to say, well, then you have this or then you have that, and then you have to consider this. It's like, no, if you were to remove any and all barriers-- systemic oppression, whatever, any barriers to that world, what would that look like and how can we get there?

[00:35:32.92] And I think especially in the moment that we're in-- and I didn't really think of this as a spiritual thing, but I am now, is that as we're having this conversation, that it's like we have the people who are very much hopeless. And for those who have a sense of hope, have a sense of optimism, we need to elevate them. Like, we need to support them in some capacity, because even in their hopeless state, we still need their perspective. We still need that voice.

[00:36:02.31] And we also need the voices of people who are thinking of a future that, in the current context, is just simply not possible, because we need everybody. I think that's what I've really taken away from this moment. There is a role for everybody. There is a role for the people who are just learning about the impacts of systemic racism or injustice globally speaking.

[00:36:23.29] There is room for folks to understand it, and there's also room for people to envision a better future, to be the guides, to be the trailblazers, of a new future and a new vision. And we've always needed people that are both. I don't think there's-- I can't think of a single social justice movement that didn't have all of those folks as part of the people that lead us to a better future. And so I think that's something that I've really sat with, in addition to what you shared, is that there is literally a role for everybody in this particular moment.

[00:36:58.08] OLIVER GOODRICH: In my world, when we really like something that somebody said, we'll say something like "preach." And you make me want to say "preach," Anthony, because what you're saying really resonates with me, and I think is a really hopeful thought. And this conversation has really lifted my spirits on a gloomy fall Ithaca day that we're experiencing as we recorded.

[00:37:18.69] So I just want to thank you both for the ways in which you have brought your own spirituality into this conversation, to the table. I feel enriched by it, and it has given a boost to my spirit. I just want to thank you both.

[00:37:28.67] TORAL PATEL: So just on a very last note, Oliver, can you spend just a few minutes talking about some of the resources that are available as part of your office? Not only just for students, but maybe for staff as well?

[00:37:39.95] OLIVER GOODRICH: Yeah, thanks. Happy to do a shameless plug. So because we're an office in the Division of Student and Campus Life, our work is mainly

focused on students. But we have lots of opportunities that are open to non-students as well.

[00:37:54.51] So in the Office of Spirituality and Meaning Making in particular, I would point folks to our website. We have some resources there, particularly looking at the intersection of spiritual practice and the COVID pandemic, and also spiritual practice and the racial awakening that we're going through. So two good sets of resources there that are non-sectarian.

[00:38:15.26] Some are specific to one tradition. Some are open to people regardless of tradition. So there's a number of resources that are compiled on the site.

[00:38:21.89] And then I would say also, with all of the chaplains that we work with in Cornell United Religious Work, we have most of the major religious traditions represented there. And chaplains are available not only for religious service, but also for one-on-one conversation with folks. Many of them sponsor great programs to raise awareness on some of the intersectional topics that you brought up. And they're working with student orgs who are programming events and movies and all sorts of virtual things.

[00:38:47.00] They've adapted really well to the virtual space to do programs that explore these kinds of resources. So those are the two main things that I would point to. And if folks have ideas about other things they'd like to see happening, I'd love to hear from them, so that we can know how to be more tailored to what folks' real felt needs are.

[00:39:04.04] ANTHONY SIS: Oliver, this has been a wonderful conversation, wonderful dialogue. And I think similar to what you shared, I also feel very much awakened, enlightened in so many different ways. And I think particularly, with all of our episodes and all of our guests, I'm always just taken away by just the amount of knowledge and experience and wisdom that we have among our staff here at Cornell.

[00:39:31.03] So thank you for the work that you do. Thank you for being a part of this particular show to talk about this topic. And thank you for bringing your energy into this virtual space.

[00:39:41.14] OLIVER GOODRICH: I receive that. Thank you. It's been a real pleasure. Thanks for the invitation.

[00:39:44.14] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:39:50.57] ANTHONY SIS: Total, what a super, great conversation that we had with Oliver. I'm not going to lie. Actually, this is one of the first times I feel like we've interviewed somebody where I actually had more questions after this interview.

[00:40:07.49] Like, I have so many more questions that I know we could have easily gone on to talk about a lot of these topics further in depth. But I'm curious, what did you think? What were some of your takeaways?

[00:40:17.05] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I definitely agree with you. I think this was the first time where I actually wrote down some names that he shared, the individuals that have impacted him, and looked those up. Information websites that he shared, I've been looking those up. I agree that definitely more questions walking away, which I think is a good thing for me.

[00:40:34.16] There were a couple of things I think that stood out to me. One of the biggest ones is when he mentioned that the difference between melting pot and possibly a buffet style or a potluck mentality. And whenever we're taught, everybody always says America is like a melting pot.

[00:40:53.81] But essentially, when you think about what a melting pot is, it's also that we all melt into one group or one identity. And so looking at it from a different lens of a potluck or a buffet really stood out to me, because then we each get to keep our individual identities. But yet we still become part of this larger lunch or dinner, or whatever the concept is.

[00:41:16.13] If we're looking at a potluck, we become part of this larger group. But yet, each dish within the potluck can still kind of hold its own. And so when I put that on to individuals, it's that we can become part of this larger America. But yet, we can still hold on to our individual identities. And so I really, really liked that philosophy, and that's something that really stood out to me.

[00:41:37.84] ANTHONY SIS: I agree. I love the potluck metaphor. And I think for me, in addition to that-- I mean, so many things I really took away from this. One of the things that I also, in thinking about this recap, have come to realize is that because I don't think about this identity as much in terms of my religious identity, because I don't particularly subscribe to any one particular religion, it's also, I think, been a source of discomfort in some ways. And so it's something that I'm still sitting with.

[00:42:10.73] But I think this idea of spirituality, religion, and faith, and trying to make meaning of all three, for me has caused a lot of discomfort to really explore, especially why maybe I haven't in previous times really explored these three and how I define them for myself. And so something that I'm still taking away is trying to figure out how does this impact me on a personal level? But then in addition to that, how does that impact the types of conversations, the I have, the types of trainings that I facilitate, dialogues that I facilitate, around religion, spirituality, and faith? And so that's something that I'm sitting with.

[00:42:45.27] But one of the key things that I really appreciated that Oliver shared in the second part of the show was this whole notion of posture and how our posture really matters. And I think even outside of the spiritual context that he had used it in, I think

posture totally matters in terms of how we engage in conversations around difference, or in conversations that may cause discomfort. And our posture really does matter in terms of our body language-- even what we tell ourselves in our heads, and how we then communicate that through our external physical presence, whether it's through body language, whether it's the tone of voice, whether it's what we say directly to certain people, that can cause in some cases biases to be said and to occur on campus.

[00:43:28.89] And so that's one of the biggest takeaways that I'm really sitting with. It's just how can I possibly be inclusive or more inclusive than what I think it already is? And how can I continue to really focus on this notion of posture in a spiritual context? And that's something that I'm going to continue to explore in the present, as well as in the future.

[00:43:49.01] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. So Anthony, I agree with you, because that was the other point that I had, as well as [? all ?] about the posture. And a couple of my takeaways was-- I think Oliver mentions postures and attitudes, and ultimately, that can actually lead to action, and spiritual opening as well. And so the concept of thinking through how we open our physical posture and attitudes, and what message that conveys to somebody that we might be speaking to, or in your case you might be presenting to. And I thought that was very powerful.

[00:44:20.45] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. Another piece I really liked about our conversation, too, was in just the similarities with how we view engaging people who may not subscribe to any one particular religion or faith belief, or even maybe consider themselves spiritual. I really loved Oliver's answer in terms of saying, like, there is a space. And everyone has a space to be a part of the conversation, whether or not they do or do not believe in religion, faith, or have any type of spiritual practice. And I think his rationale and his reasoning is very similar to something that I've thought about.

[00:44:55.73] But it really just solidified it during our interview that, yeah, we should be engaging across difference, and that we shouldn't be afraid to engage across difference, because it actually may better inform our current practices, [? and ?] particularly on this topic around religion, around faith. I know for me, on a personal level having engaged with different types of-- or being exposed, rather, to different types of practices has actually kept me much more open-minded to people of various religious beliefs and backgrounds. And so I've gone to masses from Baptists, and I've gone to-- I don't know if they call them services, but for Baha'I faith.

[00:45:34.81] Baha'I faith is a particular religion that is very inclusive of other religions as well. And so I've been to some of their services gatherings, and just been exposed to just so many different types of religions and practices and beliefs that I think for me, on a personal level, it's part of the reason why I don't subscribe to any one particular one. Because I understand that people view higher being and people view all of these different values in a different way, but not in a negative way, because they're different.

[00:46:05.62] Going back to what Oliver said to around celebrating difference and the importance of celebrating difference, especially when it comes to religion, for us to really then hone in on this, what does our posture look like when we then interact with people of various faiths and religious backgrounds? I think there's just so much overlap there. And I thought that was really powerful as a takeaway and as a message for me to constantly remind myself, and hopefully for others that they resonate with as well.

[00:46:31.56] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and for me, it was taking that, and adding in the philosophy that we can actually learn to practice that. And that's what I really liked. You can actually practice, or learn to practice, a sense of generosity and openness.

[00:46:44.77] And it has nothing to do necessarily with a particular religion or faith or spirituality. And then that allows us to move past our differences and towards a connection through these differences that we might have. And so I thought that was very powerful as well.

[00:46:59.62] ANTHONY SIS: If I could just add one more thing to this recap, I think just remembering the importance of values-- and Oliver talked about this as a way to connect across difference. But I think it's something to always remember, to hone in on our values and to use our values, both personally, as well as at an organizational level, as a way to connect with others across difference. So for example, even here at Cornell, we have our core values. And so that's something that we, as an organization based on those values, uphold and maintain through the work that we do, through the interactions, that we have with others on campus. And so that piece around really connecting with others on values, rather than on specific differences and honing in on those differences, I thought was really important as well-- is the takeaway for all of us to really remember when we're having these difficult conversations around some topics that may be considered taboo in the workplace, like spirituality, religion, and faith.

[00:47:51.98] TORAL PATEL: If you like what you've heard, be sure to subscribe and submit a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or SoundCloud. It helps new listeners find us and the show. Also, if you or a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed for an upcoming episode, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:48:11.97] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:48:17.80] TORAL PATEL: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity in collaboration with Cornell Broadcast Studio.

[00:48:32.16] ANTHONY SIS: We would like to give a special shout out and thank you to our co-producer and sound engineer Bert Odom-Reed for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:48:42.29] BOTH: Thanks, Bert.

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[00:48:43.43] OLIVER GOODRICH: Truly. Thanks, Bert.