

Tolerance
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Thank you for once again allowing me to address you. I hope you will “tolerate” what I have to say!

Here’s a quick U-U quiz: Which one of the Seven Principles specifically mentions tolerance?
Answer: None of them! At the end of my presentation, I’ll let you tell me why.

So, what is tolerance? It goes without saying, I think, that Unitarian-Universalism includes tolerance among its core values. Along with reason and freedom, tolerance comprises what might be called the U-U holy trinity. A cornerstone of liberal religion and of liberal society generally, it is rightly celebrated and honored as an essential social virtue. And, we U-Us have a special claim to call this virtue our own, since, as some of you are no doubt aware, it was the Hungarian Unitarian Francis David who stood up at the Diet of Torda and successfully pleaded with King John Sigismund of Transylvania to proclaim religious tolerance in his kingdom.

That was in 1568, only 30 or so years after the first recorded use of the word tolerance in the sense of the permissiveness of an authority. If you’ll “bear” with me for a bit more etymology, I can tell you that the word tolerance itself comes to us, through Old French, from the Latin verb *tolerare*, meaning...well...to bear or endure. Its earliest usages thus had to do with endurance and fortitude, with the ability to suffer and survive under great hardship—no doubt a much needed characteristic in those days. But, as mentioned, by the early 1500s the word began to be applied to authorities, who could be described as tolerant in the sense of “permissive.” Not until some 230 years later did the word come to acquire something like its modern meaning as applied to individuals, “free from bigotry or severity.” In the 19th century the word was extended still further: tolerance as “allowable amount of variation” dates from 1868, and the physiological sense of “ability to take large doses” was first recorded in 1875.

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Why take this side trip into the word’s history? Well, as the prominent political philosopher Wendy Brown has pointed out in her recent book on tolerance, *Regulating Aversion*, these meanings are laced, often in not-so-subtle ways, with a judgment about what is tolerated. In the oldest sense, the word suggests a kind of determination to take whatever the world dishes out—no matter how difficult things become, those with tolerance can take it, they will persevere. Later, though, as the word is shifted to authorities, the balance of power shifts as well. Instead of the enduring tolerance of the stooped shoulder and the weary brow, we see the magnanimous tolerance of the sovereign who, while he can afford not to be tolerant, can also choose to be.

The sense of tolerance with which we are most familiar today represents something of a joining of these two older senses. On the one hand, what we tolerate is generally something we would rather not have to put up with—noise, or pain, or an irritating co-worker. On the other hand, we

are used to being the sovereigns of our own little worlds, so that if we tolerate something, we often do so by choice—and may even congratulate ourselves for doing so. Sure, we could say something to the irritating co-worker, but perhaps it would be better to exercise some tolerance.

The modern sense of tolerance, then, combines the notions of suffering and authority in such a way that tolerance can almost be seen as a kind of gift to what (or whom) is tolerated—yet it is a gift with strings attached, a gift that comes with a reminder that, in a better world, this gift would not be necessary.

This, of course, is the troubling thing about tolerance—that while it is almost universally praised as an unequivocal virtue, there is nevertheless a certain marginalization or subordination of what is tolerated. Indeed, to refer again to Wendy Brown’s work, the concept of tolerance often amounts to a way of managing some unwanted intrusion, whether it be gays in the military, blacks in the suburbs, or women in the boardroom.

Even in its technical uses, there remains an evaluation implicit in the notion of tolerance. In industrial machinework, for example, tolerance refers to the amount of deviation allowable from a set standard. So tolerance judges a thing and finds it wanting, even while it offers a consoling gesture which says, “That’s all right—you can be here anyway. We won’t hold it against you...too much.”

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Now I don’t want to give the impression that I think tolerance is a bad thing. It is necessary that we tolerate certain things in everyday life, just to live together and get along. And, if the alternative is persecution, oppression, or worse, then tolerance is obviously not a bad bargain. Furthermore, an official policy of tolerance that remains clearly neutral, such as that expressed by the non-establishment of religion clause in the U.S. Bill of Rights, strikes me as an entirely appropriate practice for governments, corporations, and other institutional bodies.

But, when we turn to the question of how individuals worshipping together within a religious community ought to relate to one another, as well as how religious communities themselves ought to relate to other religious communities, then the notion of tolerance, it seems to me, becomes more problematic.

To illustrate what I mean by this, perhaps it would help to perform a small experiment. When I was a boy growing up in Louisville, we used to recite a covenant similar to one that we occasionally say here:

Love is the spirit of this church
And service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth,
And to love one another.

Now listen to a very slightly modified version of the same thing:

Love is the spirit of this church
And service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth,
And to tolerate one another.

Doesn't quite have the same ring, does it?

Or, consider that we are a "Welcoming Congregation," not a "Tolerating Congregation." Does it make a difference? It certainly seems to me that it does.

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Or, finally, let me tell you a story. It's an embarrassing one, but that's o.k., because it's about myself. A while back, as I was listening to Tommy give his first presentation to us, I was struck by how little I understood of Deaf culture. Not that I had ever thought of myself as knowledgeable in that area—it was more that I simply had not found myself in a situation where I would encounter it. I listened, and watched, with fascination as Tommy told us about this culture—so different from the hearing culture I know, and yet at the same time so similar in unexpected ways. Poetry, accents, regional dialects—all these are found in Deaf culture just as they are in hearing culture. It's hardly surprising when you think about it, but that's just it: I had never thought about it.

It was on the way home that day, as I was thinking about the possibility of more Deaf individuals joining our congregation, and the changes that might bring about, and how very *tolerant* I would be if even quite a large number of such individuals were to join, when I was hit by a thought that simultaneously was intriguing, frightening, and made me feel ashamed. I thought: What if our church becomes so popular in the Deaf community that there are more of "them" than there are of "us"?? I won't belabor the image; the gist of it was that I suddenly had a picture of myself and the other members of the hearing community struggling to fit in—unsure which committees I might be able to join and be effective on, standing close together at coffee hour, unable to adjust to the rapid hand and body movements all around us or to enter freely into any conversation other than our own. And, for a split second, I found myself gripped by a strange anxiety—if we let Deaf people into our church, will it still be *our* church?

Now, I hope no one will misunderstand why I bring this rather embarrassing story up. It's certainly not to suggest in any way that we not welcome anyone, Deaf or hearing, who wishes to enter through our doors. Rather, my purpose is to point to the way in which tolerance can function not only as a device of condescension, but more insidious still, as a way of sequestering oneself from more challenging, but also more substantive, forms of interrelationality like equality and justice.

What I mean is simply this: Tolerance creates a space within which I can feel protected from accusations of prejudice and discrimination, while still maintaining my position of implicit superiority over that which I tolerate. Look at it this way: If we were to think of tolerance as the social virtue to which our congregation should aspire, if tolerance were the ideal we decided to

promote, what would that look like in terms of the relations between the congregation as a whole and the smaller sub-groupings into which we can be divided. Would it not always be a matter of “we” (who represent the dominant group, the majority) tolerating “them” (who represent a smaller and less powerful segment of the whole)? Tolerance, it seems to me, is always asymmetrical; it flows in one direction, but not the other. *We* will tolerate *you* (provided you do not cause too much trouble, etc.)—it’s not a question of you tolerating us.

What was making me anxious—and then subsequently ashamed—in the mental picture I had while driving home was the possibility that I might one day find myself in the position not of being tolerant, but of being tolerated. And that was a possibility that I simply had to reject, on a gut level, inasmuch as it conflicted with the sense I have that this is *my* church; it is the church that I *belong* to. To feel as though I were being tolerated, it seems to me, would be to feel as though I no longer belonged. And that does not seem to me to be the sort of thing we want anyone to feel.

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So where does this leave us? If tolerance is *not* the unequivocal virtue it might have seemed to be, does that mean we’re just supposed to love and accept everyone—or, more to the point, everyone’s beliefs? Thank goodness we don’t have a Bishop Williamson in our midst, trying to speak for us. And yet, he *is* in our midst, in the sense that he is part of our human community. And while I have focused on the question of tolerance within a particular religious community, I guess I would say much the same about the question of tolerance between religious communities. So must we love and accept Bishop Williamson and his beliefs, or those of countless other lunatics who are out there, right now, using up perfectly good oxygen?

Well, no, that’s not what I’m saying at all. I suppose what I’m saying is that maybe—I’m not quite sure about this—but maybe what we need to do is to look at these problematic beliefs and decide for ourselves: are they in, or out? If they are in—if they are beliefs that we can, based on our own free and responsible search for truth and meaning, recognize and accept as part of the wonderful pluralistic tapestry of worldviews that contribute to the richness of which we all partake, even if they are not beliefs that we can ourselves accept—then they are in. We must do more than tolerate them, we must embrace them, we must help to weave them into the tapestry. But if they are out—if they are beliefs in which we sincerely can find no redeeming value, if they are beliefs that we, mindful of our own limitations, nevertheless conclude have nothing to contribute to the tapestry other than its unraveling and dissolution—then they are out. Let us not hide our heads under the sand of tolerance; let us simply say, “That is something we cannot tolerate. That is intolerable.”

I suppose I have done a good job of avoiding the really tough questions, and I hope that doesn’t leave you too disappointed. I know that there is a lot more that I had hoped to get to, but my apology will have to be that this is simply a very large and difficult topic. So, in closing, let me just say this—and if I am way off base, please set me straight—I guess what it comes down to is: What good is tolerance in a religious community? If what we are faced with is tolerable, then tolerance isn’t enough. On the other hand, if it is intolerable—well, then tolerance is too much. Given these alternatives, is there any room left, I wonder, for tolerance?