

In Praise of Tolerance

A great many people think they are thinking
when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.
– William James

Everything that irritates us about others
can lead to an understanding of ourselves.
– Carl Jung

I want to share with you this Gary Larson cartoon from my 2007 desk calendar. Larson populates his drawings with animals who sometimes behave like people, and he especially enjoys cows. So this cartoon shows the social interface between farmers and their cows at a particularly delicate moment.

The farmer and his wife are sitting in their living room on the sofa. It's late at night. You can see the moon out their picture window and also the barn, which is close by. Sitting across from the couple on the sofa on the other side of the coffee table is a cow holding a tumbler of whiskey in his hoof. On the coffee table another cow is dancing on her hind legs, gouging deep grooves into the surface of the table. One of her forelegs is flung up in the air and the other grasps another tumbler of whiskey.

The farmer's wife is disgusted. She turns to her husband sitting next to her on the couch: "Satisfied?" she says. "I warned you not to invite the cows in for a few drinks."

The Rev. Meg Barnhouse, who serves the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spartanburg in South Carolina, works in a community that is "such a small town...the only religion [most people] know is Christianity" (*Waking Up the Karma Fairy* 94). She tells about the new rabbi who came to Spartanburg and was invited by his realtor to sing the Lord's Prayer at her daughter's Presbyterian wedding because she heard him sing and thought he had a voice like an angel. The rabbi politely declined. "He said he thought maybe his new congregation would not understand if their rabbi were to sing this most Christian of prayers, even though they all

agreed Jesus was Jewish.” The people in Spartanburg, Barnhouse says, find it hard “to step outside the well-worn paths.”

Then she tells a story on herself. As a young woman in her late twenties, she traveled around the world with an interfaith group of a hundred people from different countries. Her roommate was a Hindu woman from Sri Lanka who “could swear like a drill sergeant” (95). One of the woman’s favorite exclamations was, “Jesus Christ!’ After a couple of weeks [Barnhouse] asked her gently not to do that anymore. “This is the name of someone who is sacred to me,” she explained.

Her roommate stopped using Jesus as a swear word, and then a few weeks later, Barnhouse was surprised by something and she said, “Holy cow!”

Her roommate pounced. “Oh...[so] I cannot say Jesus Christ, but you, in talking to a devout Hindu for whom cows are sacred, you can say this thing?’ After a heartbeat of respectful silence, the two young women “collapsed, laughing” (96).

Laughter can be a great healing force. And we know that interfaith disagreements don’t always end so well. In other places and other times, people of different religions have slaughtered each other’s children over what you can say, what you can believe, whose God is right. Even here in this room we have struggled to maintain our equanimity in the presence of religious and spiritual differences.

The congregation’s affirmation, which we recite every week, is clear about what we expect of ourselves. “Love is the spirit of this fellowship. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”

A covenant is a promise. So I have a question about this promise we make about how we will behave. The question is: Who are we talking about? With whom will we dwell together in peace? Who will we help? The members of this community? All of us? Just us? Just the people we like?

Just the like-minded? Just our political allies, whoever they are? Who's included in these promises?

Earl Morse Wilbur, a UU historian, has said that the core of our faith is “freedom, reason, and tolerance.” This summary has fallen out of favor in the years since I studied Wilbur's work. Tolerance is seen as too weak and condescending a name for the kind of acceptance we want to practice. *Respect* has become the preferred term for this aspect of our values. Freedom, reason, and respect. Some claim our faith calls us to universal love. I have actually been known to make that claim.

But today I'm shooting for something more realistic. Respect is good, a lofty goal worth envisioning and striving for, but I don't necessarily hold out hope for the time when we will all respect each other, and I don't think it's necessary for us to love each other to dwell together in peace. Today I'll settle for tolerance.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “...the law can't make a man love me; religion and education will have to do that. But the law can control his desire to lynch me” (*The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Volume 11* 85).

And Alice Walker wrote,

Love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home.
Love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one. (SLT #564)

Tolerance names a modest and reachable goal: to be tolerant is to have “sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own” (Webster's Collegiate, 11th edition). It comes from a Latin root *toleratus*, which means to endure or put up with. You don't have to invite the cows in for drinks. You can just leave them peaceably grazing in the meadow.

It's hard to be tolerant. It is radically countercultural especially in today's political climate. Nobody tolerates anybody. Tolerance doesn't feel right. It feels weak and indecisive. Conflict is the currency of our culture. The object of the game is to win.

We are a people of strong beliefs, a people of conviction. Passion, commitment, conviction pull us toward intolerance and divisiveness. When we feel strongly, when we believe deeply, we want to take clear positions and say strong, passionate things: "You Shall Do As I Say, pig-bastards." (Marge Piercy, "Report of the Fourteenth Subcommittee on Convening a Discussion Group"). We feel compelled to act, to DO SOMETHING, to confront, to resist, to fight, to destroy.... Mahatma Gandhi said, "Once one assumes an attitude of intolerance, there is no knowing where it will take one."

A Buddhist friend gave me a wonderful image for the alternative to remaining stuck in our intolerance. She said think about opening the doors to a landscape that contains both you and the person with whom you disagree. Widen the landscape until everyone is inside, and then just see what you notice. You don't have to act immediately to solve it or decide about it. You can just come into the landscape and see what happens. Find out more. Be curious.

The great educator Parker Palmer said, "Knowing requires a personal relation between the knower and the known" (*To Know As We Are Known* 35).

During the summer months, I teach writing at a maximum security prison east of Fishkill in Green Haven, New York. For the men who are incarcerated there, Green Haven prison is a violent and dangerous place. And in this place some years ago a program was developed by inmates and civilians from outside the prison called Alternatives to Violence. Here are the AVP Guides to Transforming Power:

1. Seek to resolve conflicts by reaching for common ground.
2. Reach for that which is good in others.

3. Listen before making judgments.
4. Base your position on truth.
5. Be ready to revise your position if it is wrong.
6. Expect to experience great inward power to act.
7. Be willing to suffer for what is important.
8. Use surprise and humor.
9. Learn to trust your inner sense of when to act.
10. Be willing to suffer for what is important.
11. Be patient and persistent.
12. Build community based on honesty, respect, and caring.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to see the potential for salvation in every human soul. Tolerance is our heritage. It is in our covenant and our mission. It can be our spiritual practice. We are called to be accepting of difference, to honor diversity, to become open-minded and open-hearted. Our hearts are not valentines, they're muscles.

I have a minister colleague here in Yorktown who can't participate in the Thanksgiving Interfaith Service because he believes that people can come to God only through Jesus Christ. I was thinking about the atonement, the orthodox Christian claim that Jesus died for my sins, and I thought to myself, "That's preposterous!" How do I hold on to my conviction and still respect my colleague, who believes something else?

Five years ago I marched in support of a woman's right to reproductive choice in Washington, DC with some of the women and men in this room. We were joined by Unitarian Universalists from all over the country, and we felt strong and proud to be together. The sun was shining. Then we rounded a corner, and I saw a sign that said, "I regret my abortion." A group of women were standing on the sidelines, dressed in black, carrying these big signs: "I regret my abortion."

And I thought, That's right. I do. I regret my abortion. I want women to have a choice. I am willing to fight for a woman's choice, and I

also regret my own abortion. And in that moment, it did not make any sense at all to me that these were somehow opposite sides. I did not want to be on the other side from the women who were carrying the signs. I knew that I was one of them.

“Live the question.” Rilke said. I want to get to the answer because living in the question is so hard. I want to change the world, change the government, change the political process, change the media, change you. But change begins with me, with being willing to be changed, with knowing that if I engage openly I will be changed. This is what “open-hearted” means.

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field,” Rumi wrote. “I’ll meet you there.” Our congregational covenant includes everybody. God bless the whole world, no exceptions. Our First Principle is the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person. This is the challenge and the gift of our faith.

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In Mohegan Lake, NY
September 21, 2008