

## WISDOM CIRCLES

September 2013

### What Does It Mean To Be A Tolerant Person?

In her book, *Beginners Grace*, Rev. Kate Braestrup describes a quickly put together service of prayer and sharing at her small Maine UU congregation on the evening of September 11, 2001. One woman really irritated Rev. Braestrup because, while the buildings were still smoldering and the death toll kept rising, the woman said that it was important to understand the hijackers and have compassion for them. As the woman left the church parking lot, Braestrup noticed that her car bore a bumper sticker that said, "Zero Tolerance For Domestic Violence."

The Transformational Theme this month is Acceptance, Tolerance, and Respect. This anecdote points to one of the main problems with the UU value of tolerance. Namely, is there anything or anyone we shouldn't tolerate? If so, how do we know what is intolerable?

As the word "tolerance" is used today, it implies a certain flavor of enduring what is unpleasant. And that is indeed the Middle English origin of the word. One of the dictionary definitions of the word has a scientific and medical context. It is the amount of a substance one can consume without poisoning oneself! How much of your fundamentalist relative's theologizing can you tolerate before it becomes toxic?

Still, the great wisdom traditions maintain that hatred is the most toxic thing of all. Hatred hurts us and it leads us to hurt others. And it is important to realize that tolerance, or respect for the other person does not mean a lack of critique. One can argue without hatred or ill will. In a democracy, one can fight an intolerable law or policy with all one's strength, without disrespecting the humanity of the other person. It is not easy. It takes effort and discipline. But the more we are able to do that, the more healing and understanding we can bring into the world and the less harm we do.

It hurts to push someone out of your heart. We can protect ourselves from harmful behavior without denying the humanity the perpetrators have in common with us. It comes from understanding that even "the enemy" shares the desire to lessen their suffering and increase their well-being, however twisted and deluded their understanding of that may be. We all want to be safe. We all want to be healthy. We all want to thrive. Knowing this is acceptance and respect.

## **Spiritual Exercise**

This month our spiritual exercise is very challenging. Are you up for it? Here it is: have a conversation with a relative or acquaintance with whom you profoundly disagree, probably about religion or politics. Perhaps you ordinarily argue with the person to win them over to your opinion with your irrefutable knowledge of the facts! How's that worked out for you? Or perhaps you simply avoid these subjects when you are together and converse on safer ground. This time, I'm asking you to initiate a conversation where you just ask questions and listen. You won't be arguing with or challenging them. You won't be giving your side. You are only seeking to understand the experiences in the other person's life that has led them to form their opinions.

Here are some of the questions you might ask:

When did you first come to see the world from this perspective?

What experiences have led you to adopt the world view you have today?

If this is a religious perspective you might ask them to describe their relationship with God. Try to understand the needs, experiences and contexts that have led them to see the world the way they do. Ask clarifying but not challenging questions. And that's it. You don't get to give your side this time. If they ask you to share similarly, make another time to do so.

After the conversation, on your own, reflect on what you have learned. Are all their opinions based on greed, ignorance or intellectual laziness as you may have suspected? Or was there an understandable, even wholesome, need behind their quest for understanding? Did anything they said lead you to change your mind about anything?

## **Questions for Reflection**

What are the boundaries of what is tolerable in groups or people's beliefs and actions? How would those boundaries be enforced while respecting the worth and dignity of the people involved?

Are there areas of your life and thought where, if you were to be honest, you are not as tolerant or accepting as you know you should be? What are those areas?

Tell about an experience where you came to accept, or even befriend, a person whose beliefs and/or worldview differed from you.

## Words of Wisdom

In the practice of tolerance, one's enemy is the best teacher.

- Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama

How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because some day in life you will have been all of these.

- George Washington Carver

Monsieur l'abbe, I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write.

- Voltaire

Think for yourselves and let others enjoy the privilege to do so too.

- Voltaire

The price of the democratic way of life is a growing appreciation of people's differences, not merely as tolerable, but as the essence of a rich and rewarding human experience.

- Jerome Nathanson

I used to think anyone doing anything weird was weird. Now I know that it is the people that call others weird that are weird.

- Paul McCartney

There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves all of us not to talk about the rest of us.

- Robert Louis Stevenson

Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us, not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing.

- Rachel Naomi Remen

We hate some persons because we do not know them; and will not know them because we hate them.

- Charles Caleb Colton

Life is God's novel. Let him write it.

- Isaac Bashevis Singer

I would never belong to a group that would accept someone like me as a member.

- Groucho Marx

When my mind is still and alone with the beating of my heart,  
I can sense my basic humanity,  
And then I know that all men and women are my brothers and sisters.  
Nothing but my own fear and distrust can separate me from the love of friends.  
If I can trust others, accept them, enjoy them,  
Then my life shall surely be richer and more full.  
If I can accept others, this will help them to be more truly themselves,  
And they will be more able to accept me.

- Paul Beattie

There is no squabbling so violent as that between people who accepted an idea yesterday and those who will accept the same idea tomorrow.

- Christopher Morley