

## **THE TOLERANCE DILEMMA**

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**For the past several years, the Unitarian Universalist Association and many of its ministers actively took on the religious right, or the so called "Moral Majority" to task. For the first time since the Great Awakening we actually stepped forward from our well earned and practiced stance of religious tolerance and said, out loud, to the politically motivated religious moralists, "You are wrong and we are not going to sit back and take it anymore!"**

**Over the years, we worked very long and hard to create an environment of religious tolerance for all people, which not only provided a space for us as respectable worshippers but also for others whose struggle to be recognized, endured a similar route. It has been a long road and one we have paved it with great care.**

**The UUA has determined that there are fundamentalist groups which have seriously violated OUR seven principles, Those principles are the only statements which all our member congregations profess to embrace nationally. They are very general and open ended, INTENTIONALLY so to allow for individual interpretation as well as to encourage each congregation to express them from within and to their own communities in the form of social action. So why is all of this so hard?**

**Because, in a way we are, what I have termed, proponents of A Cereal Aisle Theology.**

**Our introduction to newcomers is much like taking a 3 year old to the supermarket and standing at the end of the breakfast cereal aisle, saying, "What kind do you want?" The euphoria of having so many choices is all enveloping, but I will bet you that three hours later no choice has been made. Or you find yourself with 50 boxes in your cart. There are just too many to try. Sometimes its more productive to say, "Ok honey, what would**

you like for breakfast, Cheerios or Shredded Wheat?" Next week you might offer Rice Krispies and Honey Bunches of Oats! Thus we have a simple analogy of the basic "UU and New to UU" dilemma, which can also neatly apply to our definitions of tolerance as we offer up our issues for answers.

There is no doubt that our faith is one of tolerance for the beliefs of others, which is the easy part.

Our religious neighbors are use to reciting a common creed, a dogma, rituals which define the moral laws for them and dictate how they should respond according to their teachings. So do we in the form of our seven principles. However the similarity stops there.

It was not the words of our worship that set off the Fundamentalist alarm, it was our ACTIONS in behalf of our beliefs that caused all the runcus.

In 1984 when our principles were adopted we felt that we had finally agreed upon STATEMENTS which would honor the dignity of men and women and all the races and ethnic groups and creeds, and also allow for the exploration of the individual to interpret those meanings in a divine or humane way as we chose to do so. At the time I do not believe that it ever occurred to us that those simple statements upon which this country was also founded would be a problem to anyone. Well it was.

Our first principle, which recognized the worth and dignity of every human person, was a red flag for anti-abortionists, and racists and bigots and homophobics. It was even more of a problem for creedal institutions who advocated celibacy among the clergy and denied women an equal role in religious ritual. The fifth principle also rattled a few orthodox cages, we meant what we said, when we advocated for "the right of conscience," as the sole criteria for responsible adult behavior.

Those two principles were heavily defined by other fundamentalist and Christian groups, as an anathema, a direct betrayal of the Laws of God. We were unprepared for the vehement, violent opposition to our adoption of those seemingly benign and humanely, rational ideas. The 4th principle,

**" A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" was O.K. as long as we kept our interpretations behind the front doors of the sanctuary and never ventured beyond, to inflict society publicly with such notions of free will, of ACTING upon our personal spirituality as a unified force, in the community.**

**In the latter half of this century, no-one minded if we hassled with the fine points of creation or tackled the divinity or humanity of Jesus, or even when we burned magenta candles during advent, or none at all. What mattered was merely the appearance of an acceptable Christian tradition, which I happen to believe we actually are in its untainted, original form. In our favor was the fact that our buildings were really old, and the origins of our faith even older and many of our liberal churches founded cities and towns.**

**Those days ended when we ventured beyond our own search and reached out to the oppressed and the unduly chastised. In the 1860's it was Slavery, in the 1960's it was the rights of women and racism. Our churches housed the homeless and fought for the rights of women to be counted and heard. We tested our convictions and set out beyond our doors again. Our numbers grew, we were heard, in fact so loudly that again we rose from a dormant nonentity to a force to be reckoned with.**

**Changes which brought to light the plight of the unfairly oppressed among us began to happen. We funded shelters for battered women and created legal aid for abused children, then we went to bat for AIDS victims, advocated for gay rights, and the fundamentalist sector got really mad and seriously trounced on our churches as evil, for the first time since the bible battles of the 1850's.**

**We have practiced tolerance vehemently for hundreds of years, tolerance for ritual, creeds, dogma and the right for all people to pursue religious freedom. It has been a long time, beyond our historical memories, since we have had to also address what tolerance means when it threatens the social expression of our most sacred principles, our personal principles,**

which this church has asked us to define for ourselves. That is the new twist in our search.

often I am asked, "how do U.U.'s take a stand against what we consider to be harmful doctrine without violating our own principles of tolerance?"

First we need to be very clear on what is meant by tolerance. Do we mean just our willingness for others to worship within the confines of their own closed doors?

Does it mean that the Neo-Nazi or a member of the KKK who walks into this sanctuary is welcomed with open arms because of his right to believe as he chooses? Belief is one thing, the actions and track record taken on behalf of those beliefs is something else. Should such a visitor reveal himself, there is not a one of us who would deny his or her right to express an opinion. I would guess there would be no supporters among us and I would hope we could say so, emphatically. BUT to ACT upon that belief, asks something further that the principles do not explain to us. How many of us would walk right up to that individual and say, "you are not welcome here?"

**WE PROFESS TO HONOR THE WORTH AND DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON, WHAT DO WE DO WHEN FACED WITH A PERSON OR A GROUP WHICH DOES NOT? What is our source of guidance if the church presents no dogma which will provide for us ready answers? Do we overlook it under the tolerance clause, or do we step up to the plate and stop it?**

The morning of July, 27, 2008 a gunman, named Jim Adkisson, motivated by a hatred of the liberal movement, entered the sanctuary of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and opened fire during a children's Play . Six were injured and two were killed. One was the usher, who stepped between Akisson and the congregation. Had he not, many more would have been killed or injured.

During a discussion after the shooting one person said of Adkisson, "He just never had enough love." In response to the that The Rev. Meg

**Barnhouse who knew Adkisson replied, "He most certainly did have love, I knew one of the women who loved him and she loved him fiercely"**

**In an article for the UU World Meg wrote; "Love cannot always be sweet and outreaching. Sometimes love must be challenging. Sometimes it is more loving to leave someone than to stay. It sends a powerful message that what they are doing is not OK." Meg has a valid point.**

**Altho most churches hopefully will never experience the horrors that Knoxville did, She sends us all a strong message.**

**There may be times when our definitions of loving means tolerating hurtful or destructive behaviors, opinions and comments which should not be allowed.**

**Being a Unitarian Universalist is very hard work.**

**It asks us to look within, to reflect upon our principles and to respect the freedoms of others. It does not tell us what to do when another's expression of those rights are unacceptable. Where does tolerance end for us? At what point can tolerance become an excuse for inaction because we are afraid?**

**Religiously we have a magnificent definition which begins with the statement that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, to worship and to seek the truth as is the right of each human conscience to find meaning in life and a faith of their own. It ends when individual beliefs are abusive and verbally or physically INFLICTED upon others.**

**We have no problem with religious tolerance. However our faith has built in an escape clause. We can hide, rationally and spiritually behind a lack of institutional controls.**

**We have permission to think as we please, because our God is not a dictatorial tyrant and doesn't own our every move. We don't live in a religious society which tells us what to think or how to act. That is our mantra but we can also choose inaction and a safe route as to how we as a church respond to the events around us and sometimes, as we turn the other cheek, we call it "tolerance."**

When my nephew was in the 4th grade in a rural school in Northern New Hampshire, he had a teacher who taught conflict resolution so well that one day a new kid from the city moved in and began to mercilessly bully the other children on the playground.

The entire class saw what was happening and surrounded this kid and told him that in this school, they don't do things that way and then held out their hands to welcome him.

One misguided child was no match for the united stance of 20 others. Convictions count and so do the numbers behind them. We struggle with life's greatest questions alone but we can no longer afford to keep them to ourselves or to remain silent about them. Tolerance is a religious issue, acting upon intolerance is a social problem, our convictions about these things are deeply spiritual. My nephew at the age of 9 confronted one who had the potential to hold, a once silent majority, an entire class hostage, and in fear as it had been the case in the past. But by joining with 20 strong voices who surrounded that bully and said "you can't do that here," kindly and effectively ended the conflict.

We often struggle with life's most pressing questions alone. Sometimes we share them, often we don't... it is the nature of our individuality. We are tolerant of others who are engaged in a similar quest. That is easy for us and we do that well, better than most. However our faith becomes real when we risk the visible translation of our individual solitary beliefs into everyday life, for whatever it may bring, the bad and the good.

Doing that together is something we have yet to accomplish. I can only stress the importance of our united numbers, even though we are small. The long term consequences of our INACTION, as we grow, toward the wrongs we see around us everyday, just gives injustice permission to continue. The violence in the schools, in the media; the angry and abused children who have given up, lonely adults ostracized by society and forgotten because of age, or disability, homophobia, racism and anti-Semitism, to name a few.

**Tolerance is our foundation, our faith our strength, but fear of retribution or criticism for acting on our convictions, toward one or many, can be mistaken for passive tolerance and can become a dangerous excuse for us as individuals and as a church, to do nothing.**

**Sometimes it takes just one person with the courage to speak the truth and may the truth of what tolerance really means to us all become a lesson in personal courage, spoken kindly, softly, firmly, justly, with conviction and with love.**

**So be it**

**Amen**