

What Do You Believe?
Rev. Laura Shennum
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I recently went on a road trip with my two youngest children. We were traveling to Omaha, NE to visit family. One of the first places we stopped was in Pendleton, OR to get some lunch. We stopped at a Subway, which on the outside look like it was not very busy. However, once we entered, we realized it was quite full with high school students. Luckily the line was moving pretty fast and we soon were able to get our sandwiches and find a table to sit at. I remember being intrigued by how many students were at the restaurant and wondered why they were all together when school was out for the summer.

The teens were all pleasant and polite. I was not threatened by them in the least, even though there were more than 50 at the very least. That is I was not threatened until I read one of their shirts and realized the collective mission they were working towards. They were Catholic teens on a mission to support pro-life. One of the shirts stated, "Social Justice starts in the womb."

It took the time to read a t-shirt for me to change my opinion about these teens. I stopped to look at what I was wearing and what my kids were wearing to be sure we weren't easily identified as UUs. I had all these thoughts going through my mind...I wonder if they really believe in what they are doing or are they doing this to please some family member; Do they have a choice to be a part of this; Will they change their mind when they get older; are they informed correctly about the stance they are taking...Needless to say, I became engulfed in assumptions about these teens who only minutes before I saw as non-threatening, pleasant, and polite. I avoided eye contact and sighed a huge relief when all of them left.

This was not fair to those teens, I did not even give them the chance to tell me their story. I merely tolerated their presence and kept my distance.

Tolerance allows us to do that. Keep our distance. It gives us permission to not engage and to not have to understand. When we merely tolerate someone, we hold them at arms length.

Or as Rev. Fred Hammond explains:

The definition of tolerance has broadened over the centuries but its earliest meaning had to do with enduring, endurance as in something painful or abhorrent. A newer connotation of the word is to offer a permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, culture, race; sexual orientation is different to

ones own. But the underlying denotation of enduring or forbearing something abhorrent remains.

By having that lingering feeling of loathing or disgust, we never fully see the person in front of us as worthy, whether it be worthy of our time, attention, or respect. We do not let the person into our circle of comfort.

Martin Buber, a 20th C. Philosopher, wrote a book, "I-Thou." In it, he describes how we experience the world in two different ways. Through the *I-It* relationship, which he describes as "I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I think something. ...The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It." The experience is done at a distance and that which is observed is seen as an object.

The second way to experience the world, according to Buber, is through *I-Thou*, which is based on relationship. The understanding is there are no boundaries or borders between you and another.

Tolerance is based on an I-It experience. You can view another person as separate from you. There is no recognition of connection, no attempt to understand. It allows us to co-exist in a world without knowing who are cohabitants really are.

In the history of the United States, we have tolerated Native Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Muslim, Hindus...the list goes on. Tolerating is far from accepting, far from seeing the other person as worthy.

Whereas, when we move to acceptance, we welcome someone into our life, into the normality of our existence, we make room for their presence. We see them as who they are and respect them as a fellow human being. This is the *I-Thou* relationship.

Our third principle asks us to accept one another, not tolerate, but accept. This means not just the person, but their beliefs as well. And it means not just in our church community, but in each person we encounter.

In his essay in the book "My Neighbor's Faith," Rabbi Arthur Green talks about his experience at an inter-faith seminar. During the seminar, a heated debate started regarding religious truth.

Rabbi Green states:

In the midst of the heated conversation, a small Japanese monk, head of the Mount Baldy Zen Center in California, got up to break his silence with his first comment of the conference. "A Christian who says 'Christ is the only God' is like a man who says, 'My wife is the only woman.'"

He continues:

...this monk had in a flash made it all clear to me. Of course there is a level where all I see is my own truth. I am fully engaged in that tradition, its symbols, its liturgy, and all the rest, just as a person is fully engaged in...a single marriage. I will never know what it is like to be engaged in any other marriage. Similarly, I will never know what it is like to ingest the body and blood of Christ or walk around the Kaaba. But I don't need to. As a married person, I am happy to know that there are other good marriages in the world. That confirms the truth of my marriage, rather than challenging it.

We each have a bit of the wisdom as our story stated earlier the world has to offer us. It is impossible for us to know all there is to know in the world. This is why we are encouraged to accept one another's beliefs. By trying to understand the language or experience of another, we are learning our own path to truth.

I think it is safe to assume we each have had at least one opportunity in our lives to engage with another person about what we both believe. In that conversation, I find myself learning about the other person and learning more about my own beliefs. By having to articulate what you believe and answer questions about it, you awaken yourself to new insights seen through another's source of wisdom.

If we only tolerated another person's belief's, then the distance we put between us is too great for us to reach a place of curiosity and understanding. And denies us an opportunity for our own growth.

Hindu Nun, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, describes her encounter with an Evangelical Christian at a choir practice in her essay in, "My Neighbor's Faith."

She says:

I may be the only Hindu nun in the world who is also an enthusiastic choral singer. I love my sanskrit chants, but I also love my Bach B-Minor Mass. Every rehearsal during break, I have a cup of Lemon Lift tea. One of our baritones...by the name of Will, liked the same tea and after some time, he began saving me a teabag...One evening as we were sipping tea, Will said, "You know I've been singing with you for so long, but I have no idea what you do for a living." The question made me smile because I knew he would be surprised by my

response...Will, I'm a Hindu nun. Will responded with, "You're a what? A Hindu nun. I didn't know there was such a thing." Looking at me seriously, Will said, "I'm in Campus Crusade for Christ." Now I was taken aback...

And truth be told, if I had known that Will belonged to the Campus Crusade before we had shared that cup of Lemon Lift tea, I doubt I would have looked forward to a conversation with him. If he had negative preconceptions about Hinduism, I have to admit that I also had plenty of misconceptions and prejudices about Evangelical Christians. It is shameful to be involved in inter-religious dialogue and still expect narrow mindedness in others, when in fact, it is lodged in oneself...

No one has broadened my mind more than Will, no one has made me appreciate Christianity more, and no one has given me a sense of how transformative Evangelical Christianity can be. And for that, I can only be grateful.

Does it mean by accepting another person's beliefs that we embrace them as our own? No. However, it does open up a relationship, recognition of the connection you have as fellow humans. You can accept the person in front of you and see them in that *I-Thou* relationship allowing them to know your respect. In addition, you can disagree.

Ghandi said, "Honest disagreement is a sign of progress." In accepting someone, you respect them enough to engage, to be curious, and to understand. Or you make the effort to learn their language of truth. You also respect them enough to know you can disagree and that disagreement might bring possible growth to your own truth.

In addition, acceptance of another person means we have to be personally responsible in our own interactions. I had the ability to engage those teens in Subway to understand their truth, but I chose not to.

Likewise, I missed an opportunity, when we stopped at another restaurant on our return trip from Omaha, again in Pendleton. I was wearing my Standing on the Side of Love shirt and I went to pay the check, when the cashier asked me about my shirt and what it meant. I told her it was connected to Unitarian Universalists. She asked do you believe in Jesus? To which I responded, "we think he is a great teacher." She was taken aback and said, "well that must get a lot of feedback." I stopped and smiled, but did not take the conversation any further. Why, mainly I was tired and still had three hours to drive to get home, but also I have to admit I did not value her enough to stop and take the time to explain. Instead, I let her run with her own assumptions.

Acceptance does not just mean we are to understand others, but we are also personally responsible for letting others understand us. It is a two way street. When we engage only in a one way understanding, then we are returning to tolerance not acceptance. We are not putting ourselves out there, we do not trust the person enough to engage in that relationship.

Acceptance means we see the whole person as a person of worth and dignity. Rev. Fred Hammond further suggests, "Before us stands a person who deserves to live their life as fully and as abundantly as possible. We are in relationship with them instead of simply tolerating their presence. This is spiritual work. When all the forces around us insist on making others I-Its in our landscape, it takes a disciplined soul to see the other as I-Thou."

This is our work to do as Unitarian Universalists. Each day, we are given the opportunity to tolerate people or to accept them. Not just the parts we like or agree with, but the whole person.

I invite you to live a life of acceptance, curiosity, and understanding as opposed to a life of tolerance, distance, and disconnection. One leads to a path of deeper truth and wisdom whereas the other leads to isolation and misunderstanding. Which will you take?