

“The Limits of Tolerance”
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Our third Unitarian Universalist Principle affirms and promotes “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” But is everything acceptable? Recently, our member Joy Haupt was struggling with this issue. Her question to me, after she purchased the sermon at this year’s Heart and Hand auction, was “Are there limits to tolerance?” As much as our UU principles affirm acceptance and tolerance, are there not also limits?

Joy’s curiosity about tolerance was initially piqued by a conversation with Rabbi Barr after he preached here last year. Rabbi Barr mentioned that Unitarians are more accepting, but that Jews can only go so far given other scriptural, historic, and cultural expectations. As Joy explained to me, she thought Rabbi Barr was right, that Unitarians are and can be more accepting, but then she wondered (like a good Unitarian) how far that goes. Are there things we should not accept? Joy asked “What about evil, people who do downright evil things that damage others?”

If we always led with acceptance, and never asked ourselves or others questions about justice and equality we would be negligent, weak, intellectually and morally lax. Our second principle is justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We can not uphold all our principles and our worth as Unitarian Universalists if we accept injustice, inequality, and cruelty in human relations.

As I mentioned in April, the UUA President, Reverend William Sinkford has been a vocal and active critic of the Sudanese government for over three years, willing even to be arrested to emphasize the crisis in the Sudan. If we just turned a blind eye because we were “accepting” we would be the laissez-faire, ignorant religious liberals our critics accuse us of being. Acceptance does not mean complacency. Acceptance is relevant only in context with our other principles; justice, equality, compassion, use of the democratic process, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the goal of peace, and respect for others. Acceptance can only be held, can only be accountable really, if it is held and weighed, considered, with our other principles.

How many times have you heard this “Oh, you are a Unitarian. You believe in anything?” I have heard that so often, and I find it so irritating. My response is always, “No, we do not believe in ‘anything.’ We believe in love and family values based on love, the right of private conscience, freedom, reason, and tolerance.” I don’t believe one skin color, gender, age, religion, or sexual orientation is better than another. I don’t believe in oppression, harming the vulnerable or intentional cruelty. And I most definitely don’t believe or support skinheads.” Just because we don’t all believe in God, doesn’t mean we don’t believe in anything. Not everything is acceptable.

My epiphany on this point occurred while I was in seminary. Part of my training involved “CPE,” Clinical Pastoral Education, an intensive full-time unit spent in a

hospital setting. I completed my CPE at Massachusetts General Hospital. Although Mass General receives patients from all over New England, it is also located in a heavily Catholic city. As a hospital chaplain I often had awkward encounters with individuals in need looking for a male priest who could offer a sacrament. I obviously wasn't what everyone was looking for, and I felt in need of a ministry. So, imagine my relief when a call came to the Chaplain's office. Someone in the psychiatric inpatient unit needed a Unitarian Universalist chaplain. Someone needed Unitarian Universalism and someone needed me.

I went to the unit and met with a very nice, young woman. We were having a meaningful conversation when she began to explain why she had called me. As she explained, she was going to kill herself, she had a plan, and since I was a Unitarian Universalist I would not tell anyone. My mind spun for a few minutes until it settled into place at which point I told her that I could not keep a confidence that jeopardized her safety or the safety of anyone else. She then yelled me out of the room. I went to the front desk, told the staff; they went in to talk to her, end of the story.

I've thought a lot about this encounter over the years, and I am grateful that it happened to me so early in my ministry. As a Unitarian Universalist I don't accept everything. For example, someone in a psychiatric inpatient unit is ill and needs help. As much as he or she has the right of private conscience and freedom, he or she also has impaired judgment due to an episode of illness. This is not an incident of assisted suicide for someone with a terminal, debilitating illness. This is the report of a suicide attempt by a person with an episode of illness, hence the hospitalization. There is a difference, a big difference. And regardless of what anyone may ever assume, I have never kept a "confidence" if I thought someone was in danger of hurting themselves or another person, or had committed a significant crime.

In our benediction I close with "honor all persons." Sometimes we honor all persons, ourselves and others, best when we say "No." "No, I don't agree with you. No, I think that is a bad idea. No, I won't keep that secret. No, that is not who I am." Acceptance is not self-forgetting or denial. Unitarian Universalism does not ask us to be silent. Rather, we are called to constructively, and clearly say our peace. The aim is to enter into dialogue. Maybe dialogue will change your mind, maybe it won't. But as UUs we are called to be who we are, civilly, and listen with respect.

In talking to Joy I realized that as UUs we are in some ways too tolerant (at the expense of our other principles) and in some ways not tolerant enough. As Joy said to me "We think we know what we all think." As Joy explained "We assume that we are all Democrats, support pro-choice, and dislike President Bush." I sometimes wonder if we make these assumptions because we are afraid of conversation, of saying what we think and not appearing "accepting."

But again "accepting" doesn't mean self-forgetting, silence, or denial. I like when our members civilly speak their truth and say things like "I'm a Republican," "I'm neither pro-choice nor pro-life," "I don't like abortion," "President Bush has done a good job."

If that is someone's honest opinion, why couldn't they say that here? We should expect them to say that here. We should encourage them to say it here. Our fourth principle is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Civility is the measure, not ideology or politics. We are all the ultimate losers when members don't

feel free to speak their truth. Without respectful conversation, dialogue, disagreement, listening, we don't know one another. I often wish our perpetual critics would try silence for a bit, and our quiet members, or those sitting on their truth would speak up so we could hear the fullness of this community and one another. Conflict aggression and conflict avoidance prevent intimacy and relationship. If we don't have an open constructive dialogue that tests acceptance we don't know one another and what we stand for, which might be why others mistakenly think we believe in anything.

An open constructive dialogue requires civility. Civility respects our first and second principles, the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and justice, equity and compassion in human relations. When we accept less than civility from others on a regular basis (everyone gets to flame out once in a blue moon, it's the "regular basis" that is a problem) we dishonor them and ourselves. So it is good when members confront one another on issues of civility, saying things like "That is not how we talk to one another here," or "I hope we can model more respect in our future comments." Acceptance doesn't mean being a doormat, or having everyone like you. That is not possible, nor even desirable.

Joy's final question on tolerance involved a UU clergyperson in the ministry thirty years ago. As Joy explained to me, this man both publicly talked about his recreational, illegal drug use, and at one point stood at the pulpit with his new partner, even though many in the congregation knew and were very fond of his not-so-former wife. Joy said "Of course he had an individual right to do it, but it just seemed like he was flaunting something." She felt torn between disliking his actions and wondering if she were being overly judgmental, not accepting enough.

This clergyperson was not the only one in our association to engage in behavior that made others uneasy. Part of the problem is the role of private vs. public information and space. The pulpit has so much power, even within anti-authoritarian Unitarian Universalism and should be benevolently used as part of the public domain, and only sparingly in reference to private information (generally of the innocuous storytelling kind) and never for confessions of illegal behavior. The basic preaching rule I was taught in seminary is "Don't preach on anything that is too close. Wait to use it until it feels like the past." Great rule.

I think that Joy's uneasiness also had to do with problems of justice and equity in relationships. Now, the purposes and principles, with the language we use today, did not exist in the 1970's, neither did the modern day UUMA (UU Minister's Association) Guidelines that I and all my colleagues swear to uphold. The UUMA guidelines were created because of collegial mistakes like the one Joy remembers. The feminist movement of the last four decades opened our eyes to issues of power, justice, and equality in relationships, and most of the guidelines are constructed with these interests in mind.

So, according to the guidelines married ministers cannot date members of the congregation, single ministers cannot date anyone they are counseling, and single ministers can not date married congregants. If a single minister begins to date a single congregant, the congregant should leave the congregation for a period of time to re-establish roles, rather than being introduced at the pulpit. You can't expect a congregation to celebrate a clergyperson's union with a member when the clergyperson is

barely divorced from a former spouse that members have known for years. That's not ministry. And I think that is the reason for Joy's uneasiness.

As Unitarian Universalists we have the right of private conscience, all of us. Congregants have the freedom of the pew and clergy have the freedom of the pulpit. But clergy only have the freedom of the pulpit in relation to their public role as minister. The minister's purpose in a congregation is to freely preach and teach in a professional, public manner, not to smoke marijuana in the minister's study, or talk about smoking it at home. Please don't accept or tolerate this behavior in the pulpit.

If you see a clergyperson out at a bar, on a date, wildly cheering during a World Wrestling Federation match during his or her private time, that is his or her business. But that shouldn't come to the public, ministerial domain at church. As Unitarian Universalists we have many freedoms, which are privileges then balanced by the many responsibilities that come with these freedoms. Do not accept less. It is insulting to the clergy, congregants, and Unitarian Universalism, and so I apologize to Joy for this former clergyperson's behavior. I don't believe it upheld our values.

Acceptance and tolerance are not realized through silence, self-forgetting, denial, or complacency. Acceptance and tolerance, and their limits, are realized through honest dialogue, civil disagreement, and conversation. They can only be fully understood in context with our other principles. They can only be realized in a struggle to understand what it means and doesn't mean to be accepting or tolerant. As Unitarian Universalists we do not believe in anything and everything, and we can only know our limits when we rigorously and honestly test them in respectful relationship.