



Yom Kippur 2006

On Tolerance

Reflections by Howard Segan

Peter, thank you for this opportunity. I am so glad this year's topic was not humility or altruism. That would have been a stretch. Who better than me - someone who does more for tolerance by making himself intolerable - to be asked to speak on tolerance. When the two closest people in your life, my oldest and dearest friend and my wife of sixteen years, laugh at hearing that you are presenting on tolerance - irony and poetic justice come to mind.

Following my words, I will be selling T-shirt that say: **Tolerance is important. You never know when you are the one being tolerated.**

I'm not tolerated like Archie Bunker the bigot. More like Larry David! Insensitive and provocative.

See if this doesn't help. Let's start with a short list of those things I find intolerable!

- Suicide being called martyrdom
- The cost of housing
- Hollywood films that underestimate the intelligence of the audience
- Fox 5 news
- People eating popcorn in a theatre as though they were at home
- Any witch hunt for scapegoats on whom we can project our rage and impotence
- Reading David Brooks in the NY Times - and agreeing with him!
- I can not stand turning on wars like I turn on Yankees games using the Last Button on the remote to see an inning, then switch to a bombing with Wolf Blitzer narrating the destruction, return to Michael Kay to describe a routine double play - both enter as entertainment - as if they had equal weight.

This paper has forced me to to revise my thinking of the word tolerance. I'm starting to think it is weak word. I see tolerance as occupying the middleground between being soft-headed and being narrow-minded. A sort of respite, miles away from acceptance and respect and a solid distance from indifference. Maybe tolerance is a cousin to the word Whatever!!!

Many regard tolerance as the emphatic antithesis to discrimination or persecution. So, when I tolerate you or your behavior or your ideas - I am choosing not to hate or cause you harm. How nice of me to tolerate you.

My sister-in-law, Rebecca, a gay woman married to Carolyn, raising Jordan and Emiliana, doesn't need to be accepted by people. She is a strong, proud Jewish lesbian with an incredibly supportive circle of friends. In her words, she "is less concerned with acceptance and more with the room to be allowed."

Tolerance may be a very necessary, first step toward actively engaging with the diversity that surrounds us, but it comes up way short of truly accepting someone for their humanity.

There was a time tolerance seemed like a strong, even powerful word. Twelve years ago, as an assistant professor of education at Brooklyn College, I taught an undergraduate courses that was supposed to be capped at 30, but registration swelled to 53. Considering that my pedagogical style was grounded in building community through dialogue, such a large class would have been problematic. Believing the Dean's promise to improve the conditions for teaching and learning, I was disappointed in her unwillingness to create another section. It seemed insensitive and hypocritical.

My proposal to the students was that we divide the class in half, create two - 2-hour sessions - one on Tuesday, the other on Thursday - rather than all of us meeting both days for 75 minutes. Around midterms, I was confronted by an angry Dean. "How dare I?" were her exact words! She would tolerate this arrangement for the remainder of the semester. I was clearly being tolerated!! Of course, in my mind, she was being rigid and uncaring.

Two years later, I challenged the inequitable system of grading connected to midterms and finals and proposed an alternative assessment measure - portfolios - handing out all A's - three semesters in a row. The faculty refused to convene a committee on assessment and equity. I was further tolerated. Until another faculty member and I began tinkering with how we structured the supervision of student teaching seminar. After seven years, the dean and the academic affairs committee declared, "the social institution had the reasonable right of self-preservation that superseded the principle of tolerance".

For those of you keeping score it is: Institutional Self preservation 1 - Tolerance 0

I still push people's buttons - sometimes purposely. There are times I choose not to be a Mensch. I understand what civil discourse is. I just sometimes... forget. I am attracted to dissent! Maybe it's a Jewish thing.

Which brings me to my current work. Seven years ago, I began morphing from a professor into an consultant for the NYC Dept of Education. On a daily basis, I tolerate - put up with - and in no way accept or respect - the NCLB/neo-conservative culture that has invaded our public schools. This labyrinth of accountability stresses cramming information into students, endorses scripted lessons that demoralizes teachers, and tests mercilessly - agonizing parents and students alike. The problem - and its nation-wide - is that an increasingly fact-based curricula with a pacing calendar complemented by a standardized testing regime may provide some with the impression of accountability but rarely fosters meaningful learning.

I am assigned by Superintendents to work with principals on how to inspire change and growth in their teachers. I see my job as helping teachers locate the efficacy, creativity, and yes, even the passion within the parameters established. Not often, but to some degree, the teachers are the problem. They can be lazy, resistant to change, anti-intellectual and simply incompetent. In these cases, I accept and respect the administration's need to gather evidence to assign an unsatisfactory rating. I will not actively participate but support their cause.

Unfortunately, the work is more often about tolerating the mandates and initiatives that reduce the profession I love to a technical performance rather than elevate it to a performance art! My problem is not with standards - they provoke dialogue. It's when there is standardization, and no one's talking, everyone's conforming.

A brief story. Three years ago, I was asked to work closely with a veteran 7th grade teacher who packed style with spunk. She was hard-working, bright and opinionated. We occasionally commiserated about parenting teenagers, the struggles associated with partnering and the exhaustion of daily life. I observed how the students respected her no-nonsense approach and structures. The principal thought she was contentious and resistant to change. I enjoyed her wit and found her to be a refreshing blend of attitude and levity.

The narrow, limited vision of teaching spelled out by the administration did not allow for modifications. Rituals and routines needed to replace professional judgment. Being unusual and effective was unimaginable. I was caught in the middle. I hate the middle. The supervisory staff was enlisted to "be on her like white on rice." She could not be tolerated. Her kind of diversity posed a threat. My voice and agency were nullified.

For those of you keeping score - it is now: Institutional self-preservation 2 - Tolerance 0

Which may explain why I hate - am intolerant of traffic. There I am stuck, the impression of movement, but going nowhere fast! Existentially, I feel persecuted - seriously! Immobile. blocked, powerless to act. I start to freak out, change lanes, better - no worse I'm behind a bus - push back my hair - breathe - Bob Marley singing "Everything's Gonna Be All Right" - does not soothe me - I am outraged, enraged - car rage!!!

For me, traffic represents surrender. Something I don't do well. I think in terms of limitations, not possibilities. Traffic, institutions, communities and congregations stir up my suspicions. I harbor strong, ambivalent feelings about being arranged in rows, inching forward like a lemming headed to the sea, another cog in the system. So when I work in a school that straitjackets the imagination or tries to separate the individual from her voice, I experience low tolerance. The problem is I am too transparent. I forget to shut up!

At this late stage of life, I can't believe I am still learning how to get along and play nicely with others. Partnering doesn't come easily. It's been a learning curve for me becoming comfortable with massaging and finessing, rather than hammering away, especially with power. I think I need to stop reading The Art of War and pick up The Tao of Massage.

Which is why I find such comfort in working with leaders who embrace being alternative: leadership that understands the complex and ambiguous nature of living. They invite dialogue, encourage modifications and promote flexibility.

I see this congregation as a fascinating cross section of humanity - where members value their voice. We don't want it silenced or purchased - and highly regard their agency. We actively pursue life. We are not victims! Our common quest is the search for meaning and order in a world that inevitably falls short of our expectations.

I suffer from having very high expectations for our schools, our congregation, the world, myself and others. The personal project is to be compassionate and forgiving of ourselves when we fall short of our expectations. I am getting better at understanding and forgiving others their shortcomings. However, when it comes to institutions, our leaders and myself, I have a long road ahead.

Robert Bly writes about "the long bag that we drag behind us" containing the parts we want in the shadows. Mine do not stay in the shadows. They peek out into the public. I get angry when obstacles block the way towards positive change. I am impatient with incompetence, and I am intolerant of rigidity.

I believe our nation has a long bag as well. I am intolerant of those in our country who have no intention or desire to see certain crimes as hate crimes since they hate the lifestyle or color or religion that a person enjoys. I am intolerant that our nation caters wars, stabilizes regimes that limit human rights and de-stabilizes sovereign governments.

Good place for joke, right!! I like the cartoon, "For Better or Worse." There's one where Elly is looking after her sick husband. He says to her, "I've been lying here for two whole days. Strange how you become deeply philosophical when you are incapacitated. I've been thinking, What is life?? What's it like to die?? What's our role in this infinite cosmos?. What's for lunch?" She looks puzzled and asks, "Lunch?" He replies. "I like some of my questions to have answers."

Well, don't we all! And thankfully many do! That's in part why I love Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars. They are based upon a dualism of We versus They. There's a clear line that separates Good and Evil, right from wrong. And yet, out there in the real world, and in here, we know that line is never so clear or straight. Life is more ambiguous.

While we strive to represent the diversity of humanity, we could do more to foster acceptance and respect for the universe of choices and the range of opinions our members represent. I am comfortable - no proud! - that our beliefs and our politics are connected. For the most part, those of us on the humanistic and secular end of the continuum huddle around a particular view of America that champions social justice, environmentalism, and gay and lesbian rights. This is not our litmus test for membership - we do not think in those terms. As humanists and progressives, we do not see questioning as heresy. Through our questions, we pry open spaces and urge accommodations.

I am attracted to this community largely due to the way I am inspired, if not provoked, to think and re-think my positions without needing to wrap things up neatly or adopt the party line. I'm hungry for this congregation to continue to offer my family and friends the chance to be open to the full range of questions on hot button issues without needing a fire extinguisher near by. Why not continue to push up against just being tolerant of our differences and begin to accept our differences as part of the idea that as humans we are infinitely complex and that our ability to understand reality is limited.

Before I joined this congregation the driving question was: What could a non-theistic, culturally- proud Jewish, father of three accept - not tolerate - in a congregation considering my disenchantment with institutions that are long on tradition and short on meaning? I wanted a community where plays replace sermons, songs replace prayers, a circle is preferable to rows, and narratives share the stage with commentaries.

The predictable uproar and battle lines should not dissuade us from raising our questions and exploring charged topics in the open. What better way to teach our children that here, at TCC, all ideas and questions are objects of analysis, none are candidates for blind allegiance. What better measure of our capacity to manage ambiguity than to explore the tough questions guided by Rabbi Peter's leadership alongside a shared commitment by all members to respect our differences while promoting inclusiveness.

Ogden Nash wrote: Sometimes with secret pride I sigh, to think how tolerant am I: then wonder which is really thine; Tolerance or a rubber spine.

My sense is this congregation will never be accused of having a rubber spine. On the other hand, I would be intolerant if it ever got too stiff!