

Mutual Acceptance – not Tolerance, is my New Mantra

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For centuries the word tolerance has been interpreted as a virtuous quality. The dictionary definition of tolerance is one's "ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with." Is it a good quality? Of course it is! Does it work? It has generally not; in the context of enhancing mutual understanding among people and making the world a better place. It probably brings some satisfaction to the one who is tolerating but it does precious little to the other. Let us examine the concept, especially in the context of our theme of connecting with the community. To me it means that I have no objection to your way of life, your beliefs, your choice of god and your mode of worship. My question is: who am I to judge you or your views? Tolerating puts us on two different planes – not on the same plane and that is a problem.

Tolerating you is simply to let you be. My wise friend, the late Dr. Frank Lockard, in trying to teach me to be careful with what I touch in the woods taught me what you all know: "Leaves three, leave be", i.e. do not touch but simply leave them alone as it pertained to poison ivy! But people are neither poison nor ivy!

The attitude of tolerance towards another person is an easy one if one wants to practice it. Easier, by far, than acceptance. Acceptance requires understanding. Understanding requires study, capacity to: listen, analyze, discuss, compare and contrast – clearly a harder approach. However that effort on your part to understand, for example, me, may allow a chance for me do the same about you and may possibly lead to a change in my views and my preferences to be more like yours. Or - it may not. But the effort alone brings us together and closer as it demonstrates a clear genuine interest on one's part in regard to the other person's. If instead, you tolerate the other person it then becomes a one way street! Mutual acceptance through understanding however brings us on the same plane and enhances our relationship and now it is a two way street – an equation.

Most of us have learned to be tolerant and that is admirable. It is necessary but not sufficient. It is a first step and may be used to climb higher to the harder acceptance concept. I know it is an additional burden and will require investment of time and thought.

Religious leaders in the past have talked about the concept of a universal religion. The most eloquent expression of that came on September 19, 1893 from Swami Vivekananda in his Chicago address who said that such a religion "must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the god it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners, alike; which will not be Brahminical or Buddhist, Christian or

Mohammedan, which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being.”

We all know that this great concept has not come about in practice. It is clearly an ideal and remains so. It is not practical but I think it is not even necessary as a formal structured organization. What we do here in Glastonbury each year comes close to this concept as we listen to other views from other faiths and enjoy them. Perhaps we need to do this more frequently not just at Thanksgiving and perhaps less formally. As I said before it demands the precious resource of time but it is worth it. I see no better alternative as we deliberate and pray tonight for a caring community and a peaceful world.

Dialog, not monolog is the key. Look around any conflict around the world. If you trace back any of them it likely leads to a world unresponsive to a simple, normal, natural desire i.e. the cry **Talk To Me!** People want to be heard, respected, understood, accepted, appreciated and even admired if we can. But a dialog is essential for that to happen. What is the first sign of trouble in a relationship? The dreaded phrase: We Need to Talk!!

So let us continue the dialog. We may even form a group among ourselves, travel together and attend a service in a church or a mosque or a puja ceremony in a temple. For example you will learn if you were to visit a Hindu temple, there is no such thing as a sermon! If you probe deeper into their other rituals such as for example a wedding you will be surprised to find parallels between traditions! I have. The emphasis then becomes learning when we explore that way.

We may even be able to exploit modern technology to skype so we can view and listen by signing on to a service in a church different from our own and observe, learn and appreciate without compromising our own belief system. We may thus skype together! This would enhance our understanding of the other, appreciate their approach even as we adhere to our own approaches. **Mutual acceptance, appreciation and adherence.**

A few years ago I wrote a visitors manual called *Pada Yatra* (Prayer Walk) for those who visit the Hindu temple in Middletown. I was inspired by the Christian tradition of the stations of cross. Each “station” in this manual became a sanctum for a deity representing the One in that form. At the end of that book on page 51, I said “We sincerely hope and pray that as you complete the tour, you will go home with the faith in your own faith reinforced”.

So the concept of mutually accepting and appreciating need not be feared. In the process we will discover how connected we truly are. We are a large family in this home called earth. We just saw the interest around the world in distant countries about our election, not only among leaders but also among people. Why should they care? There are, of course, selfish interests but by and large it is that powerful, unrecognized element called connectivity that is playing its part. Let us acknowledge it, nourish it and spread it. And unleash that power of connectivity.

It should work because the holiest of holy scriptures of the Hindus – the Vedas - declared over 5000 years ago: *ekam sat vipraa: bahudaa vadanti*: Truth is one but the wise express that truth in different ways. Truth is indeed one! That shall serve as the basis for mutual acceptance, appreciation even as we adhere to our own beliefs.

* Dr. Srinivasan's recent books include: *The Bhagavad Gita: A Thread through the Eighteen Gems**, *Yaksha Prashna, Hinduism for Dummies and Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice*. These remarks were made at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service held at the First Church of Christ, Glastonbury, CT, November 22, 2016, 7 PM