
Struggling with the Meaning of Tolerance

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From July 1992 through July 1993 the two of us worked together as Fellows for the Teaching Tolerance Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama. It has taken us several years to realize that our year-long southern sabbatical was truly a rare opportunity. Think about it. An entire year to wrestle with the concept of tolerance.

When we left our fellowship year with the Teaching Tolerance Project, returning to our lives as teachers and researchers in Rockville, Maryland, and Chicago, Illinois, among the many lessons we learned, three big ones stood out. One, the country is full of outstanding examples of individuals and groups of individuals teaching tolerance. You can find these examples in single classrooms, in entire schools and larger school communities, and on occasion, in entire towns. In 1995, we co-authored an article about these marvelous examples in *Teachers College Record*.

Two, teaching tolerance is a commitment to hard, at times highly emotional, work. It was very clear to us that those who are serious about teaching tolerance had arrived at their commitments not only knowing a great deal about learning, about pedagogy, and about their students, but also completely cognizant that their work was going to be hard, very hard. As one teacher told us, "This business of teaching tolerance is no walk in the park." These teachers also knew that more frequently than not, the whole concept of teaching tolerance in schools is still thought of as controversial work. Two separate 1997 *Teacher Magazine* cover stories reveal how even simple attempts to teach consciously, courageously, committedly about "others" can turn schools and communities upside down with controversy and backlash.¹

Three, those teaching tolerance constantly struggle with the meaning of tolerance themselves. No teacher we met who took her teaching mission seriously and who succeeded with her teaching

mission sidestepped this personal struggle. Through meeting these teachers, we came to see this struggle as not only normal but necessary. For us, too, tolerance became something organic, to be comprehended anew in each encounter with theories, with literature, with people, with communities, with ourselves. A new challenge to our own ever-changing conceptualization of the meaning of tolerance waited around each corner of our own work as writers and researchers for the Teaching Tolerance Project. Take, for example, the time we received the following faxed message from an elected city official in Davenport, Iowa, upset about views of teaching tolerance that were expressed in articles published in the *Teaching Tolerance* magazine.

Multiculturalism also teaches tolerance for and appreciation of all cultures and lifestyles. Does this mean our children must appreciate Communism? Fascism? Must our children be tolerant of the lifestyles of child molesters, drug dealers, rapists?

It was easy to write off this fax as reactionary nonsense. However, we reconsidered and eventually departed from our straight-out-of-the-dictionary definition of tolerance that first appeared in the *Teaching Tolerance* magazine. It was naive to think that a pat dictionary definition of tolerance—“respecting the beliefs of others”—could stand up against critiques like the one from Davenport.

In this essay, through a free-flowing discussion of the concept of tolerance, we recreate for readers our organic, growing definition of this complicated word. Along the way we again wrestle with why we believe the work of teaching tolerance is so difficult and what it might look like when individuals commit themselves to the work of understanding and teaching the meanings and the actions of tolerance.

Searching for Tolerance: Imagining Others

Writing about the difficulty human beings have imagining other people, particularly other people who in fundamental ways are different from themselves, Elaine Scarry, a professor of English at Harvard University, observes,

The human capacity to injure other people has always been much greater than its ability to imagine other people. Or perhaps we should say, the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small. (103)

If we are willing to accept this premise as a given, and we do—only fools would dispute a world history of injury to others—then the task before those committed to teaching tolerance, or those committed to teaching about genocide and intolerance as vehicles for teach-

ing tolerance, is rather clear: Help one another imagine the other. Sounds simple. But just how do we imagine others?

This book takes as its premise that just teaching about genocide and intolerance does not automatically lead to helping the students in our varied classrooms grow in their capacity to imagine others. Educators who are serious about their work must recognize this risk. Starting from the negative, the horrific, the shocking, the cruel, may well not get us any closer to imagining the essential human qualities of others.

Consider the 1995 book *Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America*, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Project. This book contains fourteen chapters, each attempting to illuminate horrific things happening to innocent or oppressed people throughout the history of the United States. For example, one chapter, "Blankets for the Dead," retells the story of the infamous Trail of Tears. "A Rumbling in the Mines" makes the reader relive the horrors Chinese immigrants faced in nineteenth-century America. "Untamed Border" recalls the terror Mexican Americans suffered at the hands of the Texas Rangers. "A Rose for Charlie" chronicles the death of a gay man at the hands of hateful teens.

On one level *Us and Them* expects readers to experience a personal, soul-searching catharsis when reading about acts of hatred toward groups and individuals. Both the author of the book and teachers who use it in their classrooms might imagine this cathartic state as a temporary one, replaced eventually by a more permanent, durable state of empathy on the part of the students who study and openly discuss the issues raised in the chapters in this book. Eventually, a state of deeper tolerance might take hold, one might hope. A state of respect. A state of caring.

We believe that this change process—from the uninformed to the informed to the progressively more tolerant, empathetic individual—is real. In fact, there is an ample body of research literature that supports this observation.² Nonetheless, this "expected" transition process bothers us because we realize that it has obvious and serious limitations.

For one thing, some people clearly are immune from "shock treatment." An experience with the "horrific" may not move some individuals in the direction we expect—toward tolerance. We believe this is possible even if those learning about the horrors of history are able to master the historical implications of these events. For example, an individual can tour the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and depart with a perfect understanding of how racism and anti-Semitism created the right conditions for the

Holocaust. Obviously, mastering this connection is a good thing. Perhaps it is even a prerequisite for the personal journey to tolerance. However, making these connections is no guarantee that the journey toward tolerance will be completed.

Also, it has been our experience that educators themselves, not because of any planned agenda, frequently add to their students' sense of immunity from the "horrific." Take American slavery. In many classrooms, when it is taught, it is the only black history discussed. This single-mindedness about black history being one only of oppression and horror has serious consequences for those planning to use this horrific event as part of some journey toward tolerance. Frankly, many students today do not wish to deal with this significant American institution. Many white students avoid discussions of slavery because they are tired of feeling guilty. In fact, many insist that there is absolutely no reason for guilt or shame. What teacher hasn't heard students respond to serious discussions of slavery with disclaimers alone? "My relatives didn't own slaves! Therefore I don't need to feel the implications of slavery in American society." Perhaps embedded in this plea is the declaration that, guiltless of actual wrongdoing ourselves, we should not be asked to imagine history and its consequences. We should not be asked to imagine the "other." And many black students often wish to avoid the subject too. They see that often the teaching of the institution of slavery is used to paint them into a fairly small box. "There's more to us than just slavery." And of course, they are so right.

Several years ago when we sat down to interview a homeless black teenager about her struggle to stay in school, among the many revelations she shared with us, she offered us a glimpse into the restrictive box she experienced her teachers creating for students.

What do your friends think about school?

It's OK.

Is it?

I think high school is fun. I'm preparing for the future. Socializing with friends. It's OK.

What's your favorite school subject?

Math.

Your least favorite?

History. Because all the stuff I learn doesn't pertain to my future. If I was in black history class or something I was interested in, then it would be more important.

Is there a black history class here?

I take that next year.

Other history classes don't talk about blacks?

If it pertains to black history, it's always only about slaves.

Can you imagine trying to teach about slavery in a high school classroom with such clearly drawn lines in the sand—blacks in one corner, longing for a public discussion of their full, complex history as an American people; whites in another, longing to be absolved of the guilt of complicity; others unable to decide where they fit in? *Is it at all possible to imagine others under such conditions?*

There is another viewpoint on why teachers, especially white ones, avoid discussing slavery and racism. Writing about anti-racist pedagogy, Henry Giroux points out that most whites avoid sensitive historical discussions because many whites believe that to teach anti-racism, they must renounce their whiteness. When given the choice, most whites will avoid this trauma. Frankly, when viewed under this light we see the avoidance by white teachers as understandable. However, Giroux goes on to suggest that this trauma is normal and can be used as a positive instructional force. (See Henry A. Giroux, "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness," *Harvard Educational Review*, Summer 1997, pp. 285–320.)

It is important to point out here that many classroom teachers intentionally avoid potential conflicts and hostilities by avoiding all literature that focuses on genocide and intolerance, all discussions of anything "horrific." The fact of the matter is, we are much more likely to find an absence of teaching about intolerance (literature and curriculum dealing with racism, for example) in American schools than we are to find bad teaching about intolerance. Educator and writer Herbert Kohl points out that many teachers believe that teaching about racism will in fact lead to a worsening of race relations, and possibly, uncontrolled rage on the part of some students (39). He believes, however, that when taught compassionately, committedly, and honestly—in other words, when taught well, with ample teacher education and preparation—only more positive human relations emerge.

Fighting for Tolerance?

"And so they had come," wrote the playwright Lorraine Hansberry in her classic *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*,

pouring out of the bowels of the ghetto, the children of the unqualified oppressed: the black working-class in their costumes of pegged pants and conked heads and tight skirts and almost knee-length sweaters and worst of all colored anklets, held up by rubber hands!

Yes, they had come and they had fought. It had taken the Mayor and the visit of a famous movie star to get everyone's mind back on other things again. He had been terribly handsome and full of

speeches on “tolerance” and had also given a lot of autographs. But she had been unimpressed.

She never could forget one thing: They had fought back. (45)

If nothing else, that disconcerting fax from Davenport, Iowa, mentioned previously got us thinking seriously about the “respect” part of tolerance and how any of us really gains it from others in society. Don’t we earn it? Don’t we fight for it? Is there any other way in the United States? Of course there may be other ways, but we have gradually come to believe that all of us who believe in democracy end up fighting for tolerance.

We are not advocating violence here. That’s not the type of fighting we have in mind. Instead, we are talking about a process that achieves human respect through political struggles—struggles that result in social justice. Playwright Tony Kushner warns us in his 1995 book *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* that tolerance without social justice really isn’t respect and therefore, really isn’t tolerance. He notes,

Tolerance has its uses, but not all of them are good. It seems to me that frequently when people are asked to tolerate one another, something is wrong that Tolerance will not fix. Tolerance as a virtue derives from the humanist notion that we are all, as the old saying goes, brothers under the skin; and in this bland, unobjectionable assertion is much that can be objected to . . . we aren’t all “brothers.” (42)

Kushner, a gay man, further claims that when tolerance is seen this way, people in a democratic society run the risk of avoiding their duty to care about and care for their neighbors. Kushner writes,

Ineffable benevolences like Tolerance are easily and tracelessly withdrawn. Civic peace is more secure when the law guarantees it. In other words, people seeking to rid their society of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and misogyny must engage in political struggles. . . . People who are oppressed need to strive for power, which in a pluralistic democracy means they have to strive for civil rights, for legal protection, for enfranchisement. (43)

Now, we admit that when we first began thinking about tolerance this way the prospect of chronic civic unrest scared us. But the more we considered Kushner’s words, the more we realized that there is no sane alternative to the cause he asserts. After all, the history of the United States proves Kushner right. The Civil Rights Movement, coming to its fullness in the fifties and sixties, is a case study.

African Americans did not get the right to vote by appealing to whites to do the right thing. Historically, toward black people, whites rarely did the right thing because it was the morally correct

thing to do. The right to vote, along with other key civil rights—education, housing, health—came to be because blacks and others willingly engaged in political struggles for social justice. It is critical not to marginalize this perspective because the view that Kushner expresses—that tolerance is social justice, that it can be no less—is in fact a valued democratic ideal. Historian Vincent Harding, the author of *Hope and History*, supports this viewpoint:

From the largest perspective, it [the Civil Rights Movement] demonstrates the ways of human solidarity in the face of oppression, the common hope which empowers people everywhere, the deep yearning for a democratic experience that is far more than periodic voting, but which searches diligently for the best possibilities—rather than the worst tendencies—within us all. The ties between Birmingham and Beijing, between Fannie Lou Hamer and the Berlin Wall, are central to that sense of the common ground on which our humanity is built. (7)

Viewing tolerance as nothing less than social justice gets us away from settling for imagining others passively as a key to achieving a more respectful, more caring society. It gets us away from the syrupy manifesto Rodney King put forth to the citizens of Los Angeles, California, in 1992 as fires in that city raged from the most destructive riots of the twentieth century. For us, “Can’t we just all get along?” does not measure up to the task Kushner asserts, the task of imagining others in the fullest sense of achieving social justice. Just getting along—tolerating the “other”—is not what we and the other teachers who have contributed chapters to this book have in mind. Together we attempt to articulate an insistent resistance to this oversimplified meaning of tolerance.

Educator Dwight Boyd considered Rodney King’s appeal to get along, however well meant, as “groundless tolerance.” Boyd writes,

This perspective, which I call groundless tolerance, surfaces often in public discussion when real cultural difference threatens to disrupt the flow of comfortable discourse; it gets used as a piecemeal, “polite” way of defusing the tension and smoothing over disagreement with the moral equivalent of “warm-fuzzies.” (617)

There is nothing wrong with “good manners”—politeness, civility, courtesy, patience. Good manners are necessary. However, we agree fully with Boyd’s observation that when faced with society’s real problems, more is required than “good manners.” Good manners alone do not take us very far—not far enough to imagine the other, not far enough to imagine social justice in the United States.

During our year in Alabama we once attended a party given by a family we had come to know. An incident occurred there that

pushed us to ponder further what it means to “imagine the other.” At this party, two people sat near us in intense conversation—a young man, perhaps eighteen years old, the son of the woman hosting the party; and an older man, in his 60s or 70s, who was an old friend of the host and her late husband, the young man’s father. The young man was in tears for much of his conversation with the older man. The topic they discussed was the young man’s anger with his late father, who we later found out had been a harsh man and very absent from the boy’s life. The young man told the older one that he was paralyzed by his anger, so furious since his father’s death that he could barely carry on with his own life. The older man spoke little, but listened intensely. In the end he said the words that we found so remarkable that we remember them still today. He told the boy to loan his anger at his dead father to him—to let him keep it for awhile. We particularly remember him telling the younger man that he would take good care of it and honor it; that if the young man let him carry his anger for awhile, it might free the young man to carry on with his life with more strength and compassion. We don’t know what happened after that. We only know that the young man agreed.

This memory is resurrected in us as we try to think carefully about the human traits we might need to emulate, even to cultivate, if we are truly to “imagine the other.” What traits of heart and soul must be developed to walk in the shoes of another, to feel the joys, the burdens; even, as in the behavior of the older man toward the younger one, to be willing to carry those burdens for awhile in order to bring a measure of relief to the other? Perhaps we witnessed an act of good manners at an extreme. But we are more prone to believe that we witnessed a most basic act of imagining the other, and that if it were possible to illuminate this act further, we might come to the conclusion that in this act was an attempt to further the cause of social justice.

An Essential Principle for Imagining the Other

The year that we lived in Montgomery, Alabama, as researchers and writers for the Teaching Tolerance Project, we both found it easy to say yes to participating on the family selection committee for the Montgomery branch of Habitat for Humanity because it represented a real opportunity for us to make ourselves practice what we preach to our children, family, friends, and anyone else willing to listen. If you are to know others, to imagine others, *service to others is extremely important*. The psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, commenting on what he felt it takes to create a nonviolent democratic society, once said that “Children [*we would add “all of us”*] must be helped to understand social values [*we would add, for example, the full meaning of*

tolerance], not just by word, but by their conduct, such as responding positively to the needs of others” (38).

Contrary to what some believe, Habitat for Humanity does not give away homes. Habitat for Humanity homes, well below market price, can be afforded by low-income families because of volunteer contributions of labor. The houses are earned through “sweat equity.” And after hundreds of hours of volunteering on other Habitat for Humanity home-building sites, and on their own home-building site, new Habitat for Humanity home owners still face mortgage payments.

But long before Habitat for Humanity volunteers begin building homes, volunteers sort through hundreds of applications to determine which families will be able to meet the demands of the mortgage costs. Habitat home owners—now found in nearly every state—go through a selection process similar to what banks make more typical home buyers go through. Credit is checked and income is verified.

Over the course of a year, we interviewed many families. At our monthly meetings to go over these families’ applications to become home owners, the Family Selection Committee discussed the progress of many applicants. Between our face-to-face interviews and the monthly meetings, we started questioning what society had taught us about the poor.

Most of the families we met and interviewed were headed by single mothers or fathers who worked in low-paying, unskilled jobs. Incomes were frequently supplemented by food stamps, Social Security payments for disabled children, or rent subsidies. None of the families, however, seemed to be profiting from their government subsidies. In fact, the notion that the poor profit from government subsidies grew increasingly ridiculous to us. We did not find anyone who enjoyed living in run-down public housing projects, anyone who did not work hard, often unbelievably hard, to provide for their families.

The employment records of many applicants were impressive. Sticking with the same job without substantial wage increases for ten, fifteen, twenty straight years counts as impressive. In some situations, the feats seemed heroic. How many of us could manage raising four children on minimum wages for ten years? Most of the families we interviewed did manage this and more.

We found some dysfunctional families; however, we mostly found good, highly functional people in dysfunctional economic circumstances—substandard housing, dead-end jobs, no health benefits, and a monthly cash flow with absolutely no room for either error or luxury. We mostly found good people several breaks away from what most non-poor people would accept as normal living.

And the break Habitat for Humanity provides—decent housing—was not a “free ride” either. It was simply something good neighbors tried to help other good neighbors achieve because the lives of these neighbors, in this case economically poor neighbors, mattered to them.

Long-term community service is frequently impossible for some of us to participate in, but when possible it runs a great risk of being a genuine learning experience that challenges our ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice. It can also make us fighting mad. Perhaps mad enough to understand what Clark meant when he also said “Children [*we would add, all of us*] must be helped to understand that one cannot keep others down without staying down with them” (38). If we are serious about building tolerance, care, social justice—in short, democratic communities that care about and care *for* each other—we have got to understand this, and we have got to teach our students to understand this.

Weeks after President Clinton proposed his 1997 race initiative, op-ed pages across the nation rang out with cynicism. Some of the cynics, however, were absolutely on the mark on one issue—it is time to move beyond just talking about racial intolerance and all forms of intolerance. We believe that one of the most effective means to move beyond the talking stage is community service—good old-fashioned doing. In his book *An Aristocracy of Everyone*, Rutgers educator Benjamin Barber makes a strong and passionate argument for the value of community service and its potential to eliminate racism and other forms of intolerance. He states, “An experiential learning process that includes both classroom learning and group work outside the classroom has the greatest likelihood of impacting on student ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice” (225). Programs like the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee, and City Year in Boston, Massachusetts, are great examples of what happens when young participants from racially diverse backgrounds come together to work on common problems such as voter registration drives, transportation projects for the elderly, food co-ops, housing renovation projects, or peer tutoring programs. What happens is not magic or automatic. However, the potential for understanding and imagining others is clearly enhanced ten-fold when more than just talking is going on; when doing is going on; when senses, souls, and muscles come alive in working for others, in imagining others, in imagining social justice.

In an editorial describing his study of well-known leaders “A Cognitive View of Leadership,” Howard Gardner speaks of leadership as the quality of being able to tell others new stories about themselves. “The most powerful stories,” he writes, “turn out to be ones about identity; stories that help individuals discover who they

are, where they are coming from, where they are or should be headed." Then he adds, "A crucial element in the effectiveness of a story hinges on whether the leader's own actions and way of life reinforce the themes of a story that he or she relates" (34).

Gardner studied "big" leaders—Margaret Mead, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Pope John XXIII, Mahatma Gandhi, and others—whose new stories, indeed, changed the course of scholarship, science, and cultural and religious life. But his words could well describe "smaller" leaders—the man we met at the party in Montgomery; exceptional teachers, perhaps—teachers like those who introduce themselves and their ways of teaching tolerance in the coming chapters. Here are teachers who care deeply about their own and their students' capacities to imagine the other. Here are teachers who believe in the capacity of realistic and imaginative literature and imaginative teaching to help us to imagine other souls, other possibilities for civic enfranchisement and civic care. It is these teachers' visions of social justice and their commitments to "lending" these visions to their students, that breathes new hope—and with it, new stories of possibility—into those of us who care deeply about where we should be headed as a nation, about the fate of our society as one that can harbor and care for all of us, and about the fate of our children as caring beings.

Notes

1. See David Hill, "Reel Lives," *Teacher Magazine* (May/June, 1997), pp. 18–21, and David Hill, "Sisters in Arms," *Teacher Magazine* (August/September 1997), pp. 28–35.

2. For example see James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1995.

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