



The paradox of tolerance

Ted Zorn © 6 July 2025

Reading

Before my talk, I'd like to read something I wrote for this service. It is a poem in progress. It's about my topic today,

The Paradox of Tolerance

I believe you can believe what you believe and I can believe what I believe and that we can still live together in community.

Usually.

You can think that what I think is wrong and I can think what you think is wrong, and it's okay.

Usually.

You deem one thing to be best and I deem another thing to be best, and we can both be redeemed.

Usually.

You value some things, and I value different things, but we both have value.

Always.

But what if what you think is that someone who thinks like me is unacceptable?

What if you believe that someone who believes what I believe has no place in our community?

What if you deem that people like me are less than people like you?

What if you value some people, but not people with my values?

Hmm. Now we have a problem.

I may not have been happy with what you think, believe, value, or deem to be true.

If I'm honest, I probably shook my head sometimes and maybe even rolled my eyes listening to you.

But I thought we had agreed to live together in peace.

Even if our disagreements never ceased.

But how can we live together if you want to silence me, or banish me, or subjugate me?

I wouldn't do that to you.

Because I care about you beyond our differences.

Because what I think is that everyone matters.

Because what I believe is that we are all part of a greater whole, connected to each other.

Because what I value is love, acceptance and compassion.

I will not stop expressing love for you. But I will not join you in speaking hate.

I will not stop valuing you. But I will not join you in holding yourself above others.

I will not stop believing in your worth. But I will not join you in demeaning the worth of others.

Because I cannot honour you by dishonouring others.

And I hope one day

You will walk with me toward a wider love.

[PAUSE]

Now, for my talk, on [The Paradox of Tolerance](#).

[PAUSE]

I want to speak to you this morning from a place of discomfort, a place of heartache and loss. A place of anger even.

And—because I am a Unitarian Universalist—I also want to speak from a place of love. Of possibility. Of struggle. And finally, of hope.

My topic today is *the paradox of tolerance*. But I want to begin not with an abstract concept, but with something personal.

The morning after last year's U.S. election, I received a text message from a family member celebrating Donald Trump's victory. A family member who knew my political beliefs and knew very well how I'd receive that message. I felt and I said to him that I was deeply upset. Not just because my candidate lost, but because I was afraid for democracy, for the rule of law, and for the people already being targeted.

He didn't respond with support or even a counterargument. Instead, he mocked me. Not for my beliefs. Not for my politics. But for *caring*. He said "Don't be ridiculous. It's an election. Please tell me you will not lose sleep over this". As if none of it really mattered. Our exchanges over the past few years have nearly led to me cutting off all contact, but I haven't reached that point yet. More often than not, thankfully, his messages are a picture of his kids or a recent hunting or fishing outing. However, I still cringe when I see a notification on my phone indicating a message from him.

That moment the morning after the election was, perhaps more than anything else, the impetus for this talk. I first started drafting an opinion column for one of our New Zealand newspapers -- something I have done frequently over the years, mostly focused on American politics. This particular opinion piece I have yet to complete and probably will choose never to do so.

But it was tentatively entitled, "My MAGA Friends and Family, How Can I Forgive You?"

That question gets at something I have really struggled with: how to come to terms with the fact that Trump was elected despite his criminal convictions, an attempted coup and so many other things that are unacceptable for a country's leader. And more pertinent to my talk today, how people I care

about can embrace, condone or just ignore the cruelty, the overt racism and misogyny, the tearing down of democratic institutions, and turning away from science.

[PAUSE]

I was once asked by a Swiss German woman if I knew what my last name – Zorn – meant. I said yes, in German it means *anger*. She said, “Oh no, not just anger, *intense* anger, *rage*, *fury*! And you seem like such a nice man.”

It’s true that I rarely feel and certainly rarely show, anything like rage or fury. But sometimes the rage I feel regarding American politics seems overwhelming.

And yet our Unitarian Universalist principles encourage me to see the inherent worth and dignity of all people – including my MAGA friends and family – and to strive for compassion in my relationships with them. I want to live up to those principles and to the values of love and generosity, to see us all as part of the interdependent web and I want to believe in the possibility of transformation.

But how do I live those principles and values while standing in opposition to the hatred and intolerance that has been unleashed and emboldened?

That leads me to the paradox of tolerance, which is a concept articulated by philosopher Karl Popper in his 1945 book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The paradox is this: If we tolerate the intolerant, we enable them. And once the intolerant gain enough power, they will destroy the very conditions that made tolerance possible.

[PAUSE]

I want to respect different views. I want to hear you out. But what do I do when your “views” include open hostility to immigrants, to races other than yours, to transgender people, to Muslims, to Jews, to journalists, to truth itself?

To be clear, my talk today is not just about my experience with American politics. The paradox of tolerance—the question of how we live together in

community when some people use their freedom to deny the freedoms of others—is not by any means just an American problem. It’s a human one and rising on a global scale.

The struggle is playing out in democracies around the world, including here in New Zealand. The paradox of tolerance surfaces in conversations about immigration, Indigenous rights, transgender inclusion, climate denial, media distortion, and the slow erosion of civil discourse.

Here at home in New Zealand, Winston Peters, apparently channeling Trump, recently declared a “war on woke”. He particularly opposes prioritising diversity and inclusion in public sector workplaces. David Seymour is waging a war on the Treaty of Waitangi, arguing the false idea that any effort towards helping the conditions of Māori in New Zealand is favouritism. Recent reports in NZ have revealed high levels of violence and threats of violence experienced by trans and non-binary citizens. So we have our share of intolerance here.

The paradox of tolerance surfaces whenever someone says: “You should be more tolerant”—but what they’re really asking is that we accept or stay silent in the face of their racist, anti-immigrant, homophobic or transgender views.

[PAUSE]

In my calmer moments, I want to understand why people have such views or what motivates them to support someone articulating those views. I understand that many people are hurting. In the U.S. election, many people were feeling the weight of inflation, uncertainty, and changes that make them fearful. In New Zealand, too, we see anxiety about housing, migration, and cultural shifts.

I also understand that many people live inside media bubbles—echo chambers of conservative media, social media, and communities that distort reality, that feed fear, that vilify “the other.” I don’t believe most of these people are evil. I do believe many are misled. I believe they are frightened. And I also believe they are capable of change.

[PAUSE]

But understanding is not the same as acceptance. Love is not the same as silence.

I think we are called NOT to passive tolerance, but to *moral courage*. We are called to stand up when transgender youth are targeted by cruel legislation. To speak out when immigrants are dehumanized. To resist when leaders attack the press, scientists, the courts, or other democratic institutions.

Being tolerant does not mean tolerating injustice.

And it certainly doesn't mean silence.

Tolerating bigotry is not virtue. It is surrender.

I am not issuing a call to hate those we disagree with. On the contrary—it is a call to love. more. fiercely.

To love democracy enough to defend it. To love truth enough to name lies. To love each other enough to have hard conversations. To say: *This is not okay. I see the harm. And I will not stand by.*

It is important that we resist the temptation to respond to intolerance with hatred. But we must also refuse to meet intolerance with silence. We listen, yes—but we also speak. We stay open-hearted, yes—but we also stay grounded in our values.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles do not call us to be passive. They call us to be awake. To be brave. To be a people of conscience—not just in theory, but in practice. In the voting booth, yes, but also in the workplace, in family conversations, in what we tolerate in our communities and on our screens.

[PAUSE]

So let us hold this paradox with care.

Let us stay curious and kind—but also courageous.

Let us forgive where we can—but only after the truth has been told.

And let us remember that tolerance is not the same as neutrality.

We are not here to be neutral in the face of dehumanization.
We are here to love. Fiercely. With expressions of truth. And without apology.

Because that is what our faith demands.
And that is what this moment requires.

Amen

Finally

Let us go forth in love, but not in silence.
Let us practice tolerance, but never surrender our values in the name of
comfort.
Let us forgive when we can—but only after we've spoken the truth.
Because the future we want will not come from waiting.
It will come from choosing—again and again—to defend what matters most.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- Have you ever felt torn between respecting someone's views and speaking up when those views hurt others?
- How you have responded or wish to respond in such instances?