

Meeting Our Needs — Part 11: Intolerance Has No Home Here

Beverly Pestel, Columnist

“Meeting Our Needs” is a series that acknowledges the organizations and individuals who work to make our communities better, stronger, healthier and more inclusive. We know we face challenges and divisions among us, but we miss and underestimate the essential goodness of rural Wisconsinites when we fail to celebrate those who are lifting us up in so many ways. Let us hear your stories, contact bpestel@msn.com to be included in this series.



Beverly Pestel

Some time ago a friend introduced me to *The Paradox of Tolerance*. I’ve been letting it bounce about in my head since then and now that serendipity has struck (again) and I heard the phrase on TV recently, it seems time to deal with it in terms of meeting the needs of our society.

The concept is attributed to the philosopher Karl Popper in his 1945 book *The Open Society and its Enemies*. In a note that appears in that book Popper writes: “Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.” (Yikes, got to read that again.) While exploring this subject with another friend recently, the response was, “We’re there now, aren’t we?” Yikes again.

Intolerance is exceedingly dangerous in a liberal democracy. A liberal democracy is defined as a system of government in which individual rights and freedoms are officially recognized and protected, and the exercise of political power is limited by the rule of law. According to our Constitution, that’s us, so understanding the danger

of accepting intolerance is something we need to be aware of. Tolerance of different customs, different religious beliefs, different lifestyles, different races, and the expression of different points of view are the bedrock of a liberal democracy. Free speech is also a bedrock, but when the intolerance of differences becomes acceptable speech and progresses to actions that risk the freedoms and safety of other citizens, toleration can become a danger.

John Rawls, in his book *A Theory of Justice* highlights this point. He maintains that a just society must tolerate intolerance or society itself would be intolerant and thus unjust. He qualifies this statement, however, by asserting that to ensure equal liberty, society has a reasonable right of self-preservation against acts of intolerance that would limit the liberty of others.

Hmmmm – a reasonable right of self-preservation against acts of intolerance. Is it a reasonable right of self-preservation against acts of intolerance to:

- fight book banning by those who are intolerant of some ideas?
- insist on the right of women to make their own reproductive health choices?
- suppress hate speech?
- resist the impositions on society of the religious convictions of certain groups?
- press for equal rights for all citizens regardless of their personal lifestyle?
- ensure that all citizens have equal access to voting rights?

The answers to these questions seem obvious, but the means of accomplishing them may not be so obvious and neither may it be without risk. Popper continues:

I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion...But we should claim the *right* to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all

argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. **We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant.**

Wow, that is more than kind of scary, but his solution to intolerance resonates as reasonable and possibly necessary. Where, however, is the line that separates intolerance that can be tolerated and intolerance that we dare not tolerate? Once we begin addressing intolerance, do we know when and where to stop? If rational argument is ineffective what possible type of force would be warranted? This is a terrible dilemma and a huge paradox for the tolerant. The flip side of the paradox is that this isn’t a problem for the intolerant, they see their cause as just and see no need to consider the needs and rights of others.

For the tolerant who believe in rights and freedoms and rule of law equally applied, however, this is a paradox full of risk and infused with doubt. Allowing doubt to delay action against intolerance, however, could put democracy in great peril.

Specifically, one of the greatest risks to our democracy would be to ignore the danger the politically powerful intolerant pose in driving us toward autocracy. “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them.” This quote from the Tolkien book *The Fellowship of the Ring* immediately occurred to me as I was writing this, then I wondered if I was being hyperbolic, but the more I thought of it, the less I thought so. The evil of intolerance can lead to some very dark places for society.

One remedy within a liberal democracy would be to handle this dilemma in the voting booth and make sure that the intolerant are removed from positions of political power before their voices can ignite the unwary and susceptible mob. This failed to happen in Germany in the 1930s and to think that we would without fail act rapidly enough to prevent it here is naïve.

Our strength as a country resides in our diversity, our equality, and our

inclusion. If we allow the intolerant to turn this strength into a cause to vilify and divide, we place our democracy and our futures at risk. We can find the line beyond which intolerance cannot be tolerated by acknowledging the assertion within our Declaration of Independence. “*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*”

Even though we have not fully lived up to this principle, it is the responsibility of the tolerant to see to it that we move ever closer to a fuller realization of it by refusing to accept the intolerance that would deny any fellow human being of these rights. We could, at the moment, be in danger of moving in the wrong direction and we must be willing to define and hold the line of “liberty and justice for all.”

Thomas Jefferson said, “All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.” Maybe it is time for the tolerant to drown out the voices of the intolerant with the mantra: “Intolerance has no home here.”

How many other ways to meet our needs may have escaped our notice and deserve our support? Let me know at bpestel@msn.com.

Beverly is a retired professor. She lives in a remodeled farmhouse and tends 40 acres of woodland in Richland County. When not in the woods she spends her time reading, writing and enjoying the beauty of the Driftless Area.

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Valley Sentinel is published in Spring Green, Wisconsin every other Thursday by Lower Wisconsin River Valley Sentinel, LLC. ISSN 2694-541X (print) — ISSN 2694-5401 (online)

Member, Wisconsin Newspaper Association