

Is Tolerance Possible During a Divisive Political Campaign?

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The first presidential election that I remember was in 1960. My mother was for John Kennedy. My father feared that Kennedy would go overboard building nuclear weapons. He distrusted Kennedy's claims of a missile gap and said that he was going to vote for Richard Nixon. However, he never told me for whom he finally voted.

The election did not do any harm to the relationship between my mother and father, but that year I did see how arguments over politics can endanger ongoing relationships. A few days after the 1960 election, my mother visited a friend and the conversation turned to politics. The election results upset her friend. Because John F. Kennedy was a Roman Catholic, she believed the Pope would now run the United States. My mother tried to avoid an argument, but finally admitted that she had voted for Mr. Kennedy. Her friend said that those who voted for Kennedy would suffer under the rule of the Catholic Pope, just like those who had voted against him. As we drove away, my mother said that perhaps the conventional wisdom "never discuss politics or religion" was true. The friendship did not survive that conversation.

This October we are also in an election that has generated strong feelings. Because of the election of 2004, neighbors may stop speaking to each other. Families may split apart. Bitter feelings may last a lifetime.

Recently I observed a conversation between a divorced woman who is a Kerry supporter and her son who lives in Illinois and is planning on voting for President Bush.

The woman said to her thirty-six-year-old son: "You need to go see the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*."

Her son replied: "In that movie Michael Moore has taken many quotations out of context."

The woman replied: "The basic message of the movie is correct. You need to go see it."

Her son said: "Well, mom, even if I vote for Bush, Kerry has an overwhelming lead in Illinois and will win the state, so my vote will not change the results of the election. Let's talk about something else."

The mother shook her head and said, "You are going to vote for Bush because of your father."

As this conversation shows, in every political discussion we have two kinds of interests. On the one hand, we want to convince people by the logic of our argument and by the force of our personality to adopt our position. On the other hand, we also want to maintain our relationship with the person

we are debating. The woman in my example would like to convince her son both to vote for John Kerry and to remain connected with her.

How do we find our way through this jungle of politics and relationships? Roger Fisher in his book *Getting to Yes* says the first step is to put yourself in the other person's shoes, to see the situation as they see it.

I find this hard to do. I prefer to try to win arguments by presenting my point of view. Still, when I can keep quiet and listen, I have found that I am far more effective influencing another person.

Consider the contrasting perceptions of a Bush supporter and a Kerry supporter.

- A Bush supporter believes that the President is doing what is required to protect our nation. A Kerry supporter believes that the President's foreign policy has made terrorist attacks more likely.
- A Bush supporter believes that the President's tax cuts are stimulating the economy and will eventually decrease the size of the Federal government. A Kerry supporter believes that the tax cuts benefit the wealthy and that if the Senator is elected he will work to make sure that the wealthy pay their fair share.
- A Bush supporter believes the President will establish, tax-free Health Savings Accounts that allow Americans to own and control their own health care. A Kerry supporter believes that if elected the senator will establish a nation wide plan to cover catastrophic health costs and the average yearly health care insurance will go down by \$1,000.

Of course, understanding the point of view of a Kerry or a Bush supporter is not the same as agreeing with it. Still, the ability to see a situation as someone else sees it, as difficultly as this may be, is one of the most important tools we have in trying to persuade another person to change their views.

We humans struggle with blocks that we put in the way of our understanding of another person's point of view. For example, in the woman's conversation with her son, she fears that her son will become closer and closer to her ex-husband, and that the ties between mother and son will weaken. She is making an assumption based on her fears. However, our worst fears are not always correct. In fact, in this example, the son had not had any recent contact with his father.

We pay a price for interpreting whatever another person says or does in its most dismal light. Our incorrect assumptions, or tendency to jump to negative conclusions, means that we are so caught up in our own fears, we cannot stand in their shoes. As a result, we are unlikely to be able to get them to change their mind.

A second block that we put in the way of our understanding of another person's point of view is the tendency to blame them for their position. When someone tells me that they support a candidate whom I do not support, my tendency is to conclude that, like the candidate they support, they are either stupid or selfish, or both. This blaming, and name-calling is easy to fall into, but it is always counter productive. When I tell people they are

stupid and selfish, they do not say “Thank you Roger, for your insight. I will now support the same candidate that you support.” Under attack, others become defensive and resist what I have to say. They will cease to listen, or they will strike back with some name calling of their own.

When I can calm my own fears, I can remember a basic principle that guides my life: the principle that every human being is trying to do their best. President Bush, for example, is sincerely trying to do the best he can as the leader of this country. He genuinely believes that the United States and the world will be richer, freer, and less in pain because of his actions as President. Furthermore, his supporters sincerely believe that the country is better off, is a safer, happier place, because of President Bush’s leadership.

Simultaneously Senator Kerry is also sincerely trying to do the best he can. The Senator genuinely believes that the people of the world will be richer, freer and less in pain if he is elected President. Mr. Kerry’s supporters sincerely believe that the country will be better off, will be a safer, happier place, if he is elected President.

When I can calm my own fears, I can sit with a person who supports a candidate I do not support, and say to myself, this person sincerely believes that their candidate is the best choice. I try to find out why they believe this. I try to understand things the way they understand them. I try to discover what it feels like to be them, to feel the emotional force with which they believe what they believe.

When I can calm my own fears, and listen, I can eventually find some common points of agreement with people who support a candidate I do not support. I can say honestly and frankly I have some of the same concerns and worries they have.

As a supporter of the other candidate, they are likely to have preconceived opinions of me. They have pigeonholed me in their mind and expect me to conform to their oversimplified views. So I look for opportunities to act inconsistently with their expectations. I have found that the best way to break through clichés is sincerely to say something that the other person does not expect.

If I listen to another person enough, show them that I take them seriously, show them that we have some things in common, and show them that I do not fit into their stereotype, we may eventually reach a point where they will ask me to make a case for the candidate I support. When I make my case, I try to show the other person how my candidate’s ideas are consistent with their values and interests.

Still of course, many people hold strong views different from my own and it is unlikely that I can ever bring them around to see the world from my point of view. Therefore, I need an alternative to persuading others to look at life the way I do.

One such alternative is tolerance. “Tolerance” is a willingness to respect the opinions of others that are not the same as ours. It is the capacity for recognizing and accepting beliefs or social characteristics that differ from our own.

Tolerance is closely related to the idea of self-differentiation found in family systems theory. Murray Bowen of Georgetown University wrote that well self-differentiated people, can hold on to their individual beliefs while staying in emotional contact with a group of people. Tolerant, self-differentiated persons can simultaneously be individuals and be part of a family and a community.

We enter the world totally dependent on others for our well-being. In the United States if our parents are Democrats we start as Democrats. If they are Republicans, we start as Republicans. If they are Independents or do not vote, that is who we are at first. As the years pass we have the task of becoming an individual in our own right. To one degree or another we grow to become separate persons, individuals with the ability to think, feel and act for ourselves. Still as we become adults most of us remain connected emotionally with our families of origin. As adults we form new families and we forge new emotional connections. We become part of communities of work and we join religious communities.

Tolerance of others is necessary to preserve our individuality while remaining emotionally connected to a community. Self-differentiated people can think for themselves. They can resist the temptation to merge with the group. Simultaneously they can remain emotionally connected with others in their family, their work or their church who have different political beliefs. A well-self-differentiated Bush supporter can show kindness and good manners to his mother who is a Kerry supporter. A well-self-differentiated Kerry supporter can be courteous and patient with her son who is a Bush supporter. They strongly differ on politics, but their emotional connection, their love for each other remains strong.

Still, there are limits to tolerance. Jesus said, "Judge not lest you be Judged," but later he went into the temple and overturned the tables of the money lenders, so even Jesus had his limits regarding what he would tolerate.

- Sometimes cutting it off from a dysfunctional family or an abusive family member is necessary.
- Sometimes leaving a religious community that requires allegiance to a creed you no longer believe is necessary.
- Sometimes walking away from a work place that engages in unethical practices is necessary.

And sometimes leaving a country is necessary. In 1870 my ancestors left Poland, after farming there for more than 250 years. If they had stayed, the young men would have been forced to serve in the Prussian Army. They moved to Russia, but in 1880 they left Russia for the United States to avoid serving in the Russian military. They could not tolerate being forced to participate in the 19th century wars of Prussian or the Russian governments.

In 1969 my college roommate reached the end of his tolerance. Unwilling to tolerate the policies of the United States concerning the Vietnam War, he joined thousands of other young Americans and immigrated to Canada. This year, for the first time in more than thirty years, I have heard people talk seriously about leaving the United States, if a majority reelects President Bush. It is a reflection of the strong feelings people have. Some of our fellow citizens cannot tolerate being part of a nation that has occupied Iraq. They cannot tolerate being part of a nation that has forty million people without health insurance. They cannot tolerate being part of a nation that is again allowing the sale of assault weapons. There are limits to tolerance. Each person must make his or her own choice.

The nation survived the election of our first Roman Catholic President, although one of my mother's friendships did not survive that election. I suspect that the nation will survive this election also. Still it is a difficult time and feelings on both sides are intense.

Personally, no matter which candidate is elected in November, my choice is to continue to offer my advice in the form of letters to public officials, letters to the newspapers, phone calls to comment lines and e-mails. I will even attend an occasional demonstration. No matter which candidate is

elected:

- I will continue to strive to put myself in the shoes of the other person.
- I will try not to make assumptions about others based on my own fears.
- I will try not to blame people or engage in name calling.
- I will strive to remember that every person is trying to do the best that they can.
- I will try to look for common needs and interests.
- I will try to act in ways that will shake up people's stereotypes of Unitarian Universalist ministers.
- I will try to practice tolerance with humility.

And when I cannot be tolerant, when I must stand firm because I am right as far as I can see, I will strive to do so with a spirit of both firmness and love.