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The Struggle for Tolerance

Intolerance has been the curse of every era, and this one is no exception. To fight it, people must know what they are up against. And although it can be very deceptive, one thing about it is certain: The first line of defence against its evils is within oneself...

You would never guess from what is happening in the world today that 1995 is the United Nations International Year of Tolerance. Looking at the facts as opposed to the wishful rhetoric, you might conclude that this is the international year of intolerance instead.

It has been a year that has echoed with the screams of the dying and wounded in Africa, Asia, Central Europe, the Middle East, and even supposedly peaceful North America. And the basic force behind every bomb, bullet and machete stroke wreaking the carnage is the stubborn refusal of people to tolerate other people who are different from them in some details. Ironically, the differences which they find serious enough to kill for are often imperceptible to anyone looking at them from the outside.

The fact that these horrors have been occurring on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II is especially disheartening. That war was a struggle against just the sort of barbarism that has produced "ethnic cleansing" and the heaps of mangled corpses we now see on television newscasts. Was all the blood and agony poured into defeating the Axis powers back then spent in vain?

A pessimist might say yes, and with some reason. He could point to the ethnic groups that have lived side by side for generations and have now turned viciously on each other; to the doctrinal disputes within religions that are waged via drive-by shootings and planted bombs; to the re-emergence of that terrifying old symbol of racial hatred, the Nazi swastika, on the scene of beatings, firebombings, and vandalism. Citing these awful realities, our pessimist would be quite

justified in asking if anything has really ever changed in the age-old story of man's inhumanity to man.

The answer is that if World War II did nothing else to advance the cause of tolerance, it led to the view among enlightened people that intolerance is an evil: not a necessary evil, but one which right-thinking people everywhere are duty-bound to fight.

Up until that war, everybody but a few idealists in the western world turned a blind eye to the discrimination that goes hand in glove with intolerance. People by and large showed little concern about violations of human rights in their own countries and communities, let alone in the far corners of the world.

Those fortunate enough to be among the majority or dominant classes saw little harm in holding down other people for reasons of religion, race, sex, social class or any one of a dozen other characteristics. Among the majority who condoned it, discrimination was regarded as a simple fact of life.

The rare voices that were raised against it came from outside of mainstream opinion. In fact, anyone who protested was liable to be ostracized or even prosecuted as an agitator and a dangerous radical. Discriminatory practices were so common and widely accepted that many of them were actually written into law.

When the atrocities of the wartime death camps were exposed for all to see, it became impossible for individuals with a normal sense of morality to continue believing that intolerance could blandly be taken for granted. The Allied victory marked the point at which, sluggishly enough, the tide of popular opinion began to turn.

In their recent commemorative book *Victory 1945*, historians Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein recount an incident that signalled the change in attitudes in post-war Canada. To explain it, a little background is in order, beginning with the fact that for many years, Canada systematically discriminated against Oriental immigrants through such measures as the infamous Chinese head tax.

Anti-Orientalism was given free rein in 1942 after Japan had become one of our enemies. Canadian law was applied in all its implacable power to drive Japanese-Canadians from their homes, confine them in camps, and confiscate their property.

The rationale was that some of them might have been spies or saboteurs, a flimsy excuse for forcibly disrupting the lives of 26,000 people, most of them Canadian citizens. The existence of a Japanese fifth column had not been proven up to that time, nor was it ever subsequently. No matter: as their fellow citizens were being herded off to internment camps, white Canadians were undisturbed by the injustice in their midst.

To add to the injury, the federal government after V-J Day tried to deport Canadian residents of Japanese origin to Japan, then a land in bombed-out ruins haunted by hunger. When the government was unable to pass legislation to make them go, it pressed them to agree to their own deportation. However, in 1946 a movement arose among concerned white Canadians to stop Ottawa from shipping them "back" to Japan, where the great majority had never been.

The campaign succeeded, but not before almost 4,000 people had already left these shores after succumbing to the strong-arm tactics of federal officials. Nevertheless, the protest brought a new beginning in attitudes towards our treatment of minorities. "The deportation of the Japanese Canadians was an act of official racism," Morton and Granatstein wrote. "The marvel was that, perhaps for the first time, millions of Canadians felt ashamed."

It was that same sense of shame over using the might of government to treat minorities in an undemocratic way that would eventually result in the demise of discriminatory laws in other democratic countries. For instance, the notorious colour bar in the Southern United States would never have been declared unconstitutional in the 1960s if it had not struck a guilty note in the conscience of the nation at large.

But the elimination of discrimination on the official

level has taken place only slowly and haltingly. Not until the past few years, for instance, has the official discrimination against aboriginal people here in Canada been acknowledged among the general public. Many other issues involving discrimination have yet to be resolved.

The on-and-off nature of the postwar movement towards a more tolerant society goes to prove the point made by the famous American lecturer Henry Ward Beecher that "nothing dies so hard, or rallies so often as intolerance." But it is nonetheless important that intolerance now is viewed as an object of censure; and still more important that voters have proved willing to support action to counteract it when it rears its truly ugly head in distant lands.

If the attempts by the international community to deal with lethal intolerance in places like the former Yugoslavia seem frustratingly futile at times, it should be borne in mind that at least somebody was trying to do something about it. The difference between now and the pre-World War II era is that the disputants in ethnic conflicts then would have been left to fight it out, and the weaker parties would have been massacred as a matter of course.

So progress has been made; but against that must be balanced an evident weakening in the past few years of the public will to enforce and propagate tolerance. Voters in a number of countries have elected politicians who artfully play on the grievances of their particular groups. It is implicit in the way they talk that if another group has to be repressed to advance the interests of their own group, then so be it. This particularism is capable of reopening the door to official discrimination, whether expressly intended or not.

Like the price of democracy itself, the price of tolerance is eternal vigilance. One lesson of the 1939-45 war is that intolerance starts small and can grow into a rampaging monster if left unchecked. In a sneer and an expletive uttered under the breath can rest the seed of the murder of millions. Who was Adolf Hitler, after all, in 1923? — the leader of a fringe group of bully boys who went around Munich hurling insults at Jewish merchants and socialists.

It thus behooves decent people everywhere to be constantly on guard against intolerance. But to do so, we must know it when we see it, and that is not as simple as it may seem. It is easy to detect — and easy to tut-tut about — when it bursts forth in rampaging mobs, civil wars and mass killings. It is harder to identify — and much harder to acknowledge and

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condemn — when it exists within oneself.

The first thing to realize is that genuine tolerance does not come easily. Giving the other fellow his due may often entail the sacrifice of one's own advantages and perquisites. Harder still, it may entail the abandonment of one's own inherited attitudes and cherished myths.

It has been said that no one is born intolerant, which is true up to a point: early in life, individual children are oblivious to the racial origin or other traits of their playmates. But people are not born only as individuals; they are normally born into groups and grow up subscribing to group beliefs and values. While they are growing up, they must depend on their groups for physical and emotional support, which forges strong bonds of loyalty.

Like their Neanderthal forebears, groups tend to draw lines around themselves to protect their own kind, and it is within these lines that intolerance is nurtured. On the murky perimeters of their circle, people begin to perceive enemies, a process that is greatly abetted if those enemies come ready-made on account of some historical tribal grudge.

Grudge or no grudge, the feeling that enemies are a threat to you makes them bad by definition. The "fact" that they are bad (and you, of course, are good) further makes them morally inferior in your eyes.

A feeling of moral superiority is, however, rarely enough to justify discrimination. Other points of superiority must therefore be found. Surely it is only

Those infected by it are often very nice people in other respects

right to discriminate against members of Group X if they are lazy or ignorant or congenitally dishonest or too aggressive or ... you name it. No proof of these attributes is necessary. Your group has

told you about how bad or inferior they are, and that is sufficient. Because you desire the approval of your fellow group members, you are disinclined to question their beliefs.

The defensive nature of groups explains why they are always so prone to "blame the victim." Even as they are striving to put another group down, they will claim that it is themselves who are being wronged by that other group. A member of the dominant group might believe in all sincerity that members of a subordinate group are somehow imposing on his rights by asserting their own rights.

In this way, intolerance takes on the appearance of innocence, which is enhanced by the fact that those

infected by it are often otherwise very nice people. There is a tone of blamelessness in the protests so often heard from members of groups that they really have nothing against the subjects of their discrimination. They are not against anybody, they will say; they are merely *for* themselves.

Intolerant people like to think of themselves as long-suffering individuals who have been pushed to the point of total exasperation. "Enough is enough!" they will cry as they try to roll back the progress of

Intolerance can successfully masquerade as its own opposite

deprived groups towards full equality. Demagogues have learned that this feeling of being put upon is the very fuel of power. By capitalizing on it, they are able to build mass movements in which they can

dupe their followers into doing whatever they want them to do.

Any clever politician knows that nothing unites people behind a leader like a common enemy, and that paranoia is a wonderful tool of psychological manipulation. It is easy to get people in this state to become enraged at the enemy, in which case they are psychologically incapable of analysing what a leader is actually doing. What he is doing, usually, is robbing them blind, or exercising his lust for power.

Intolerance is by nature so consummately dishonest that it can successfully masquerade as its opposite. "I have seen gross intolerance shown in support of tolerance," as the poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed.

Throughout the ages, crusaders for justice have gone full circle to take the same bigoted approach to their adversaries that they objected to in the first place. Intolerance cannot be fought with intolerance; that only replaces one evil with another. People are still being discriminated against; the only difference is that they have different names.

Of course, the question of who is and who is not being discriminated against is very tricky. There is a tendency to cry that rights are being violated when, in fact, the so-called rights are really only privileges which the complainants already possess or hope to possess. Then, too, one person's right may interfere with another's. Deciding on whose rights come first is one of the chief purposes of our elected assemblies and courts.

Intolerance not only applies to racial or religious differences, but to differences in ideas. And it is here that the tolerance of people who consider themselves



liberal-minded may meet its sternest test. We may find some ideas outrageous, and we have every right to argue strenuously against them. But as citizens of a democracy, we do not have a right to demand that our opponents (short of those who pose a public danger by inciting hatred) be muzzled, punished, or deprived of a livelihood. Inquisitions were not a 12th or 13th-century phenomenon. To this day, people around the world are imprisoned or suffering in lesser ways for what they believe, or are suspected to believe.

For a person determined to think on his or her own account, the hardest people to be tolerant towards are those who are themselves intolerant. Their minds are

Seeking someone to blame for the impact of change on our lives

closed to facts, opinions and arguments that do not accord with their own particular point of view. But the principle of toleration obliges us to put up with them, while making it plain that we do not share

their attitudes. In many cases, telling them that we refuse to go along with their prejudices may be tantamount to butting our heads against a brick wall, but we should do it anyway for the sake of our own integrity.

Habits can also draw intolerant fire. Here again we are constrained by the rules of civilization to make allowances for people whose behaviour differs from our own. The great American editor William Allen White put the proposition nicely: "Since others have to tolerate my weaknesses, it is only fair that I should tolerate theirs."

Granted, it is difficult to live tolerantly in a time, like the present. The old familiar ways of life that once gave people a feeling of certainty and security are steadily receding into history. It is natural to look around for someone to blame for disturbing our lives, and we are inclined to fix on those who seem outwardly to be responsible for it. Among the most popular scapegoats are newcomers to the country and the champions of equality who demand a fair break for those who have suffered from discrimination or are suffering still.

In Canada, the whole fabric of the population has changed in the last two or three generations. Open-minded people can readily see that the fabric has become more various, more vital, brighter and richer because of the change. And it all rests on tolerance,

which, in a multicultural society, amounts to nothing less than a civic duty. If our social fabric is not to be torn apart, Canadians really have no choice but to relate to one another tolerantly.

But perhaps "duty" is the wrong word, carrying as it does the connotation of a chore or a burden. Tolerance is anything but a disagreeable necessity; indeed, in the Canada of today, it is the key to living a full and satisfying life.

We Canadians should count the blessings that multiculturalism, coupled with the quest for a just and fair society, has brought us. This is an infinitely more interesting, enjoyable and rewarding country to live in than it was before the latest great wave of immigration brought the world to our doorstep, differently coloured faces and all.

It has also become, quite simply, a *better* country. We have gained in morality in its truest sense since the injustices and inequalities of our prejudiced past have been frankly acknowledged and addressed.

As with Canada, so with the world; tolerance represents the best hope that people may live out their lives in peace and security. And, despite conspicuous setbacks in some countries, it has been gaining in many parts of the world. For one thing, the new global economy has been breaking down the ancient barriers of race, colour and religion. To do a good business with people, you have to approach them with understanding and respect.

In places where there once seemed to be insurmountable barriers to people living together tolerantly, the scene has changed dramatically. Who a few years ago would have believed that blacks and whites would now be working together to build a new South Africa on the ruins of apartheid, or that the bitterly divided parties in Northern Ireland would have agreed to put aside their weapons and move freely in each other's neighbourhoods?

Still, it would be a mistake to believe that the battle against intolerance is being waged somewhere "out there" in faraway foreign places. Intolerance has a sneaky way of happening in the best of families and in the best of countries; it knows no geographic bounds. The first line of defence against it is in everyone's own household and everyone's own neighbourhood, where attitudes are formed and put into practice. Canadians are no exception: we must keep working at being tolerant, if only to show the world the best way to live.

