

From tolerance to love

Tolerance is lukewarm at best, condescending at worst.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue



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When we have a distaste for certain people with whom we're obligated to work or associate, we may try to encourage ourselves to find ways to lessen our distaste. There must be a way to put up with that individual, we tell ourselves. Surely I can find the patience to avoid displaying hostility. I'll just keep a distance and endure her behavior or his antics.

The instinct to be tolerant is commendable. But relationships for which we're responsible or in which we play a role deserve something more positive than mere forbearance. When the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of others within our circles bother us, that shouldn't be an excuse for not cultivating a positive regard. Tolerance is lukewarm at best, condescending at worst. It's putting up with what we're not wild about. Enduring someone we disapprove of. Trying to demonstrate we're unprejudiced.

Some differences we have with others are too strong to ignore or too consequential to overlook. But if there's one behavior we could afford to cultivate more thoroughly, it's one that would warm us up to others whom we're inclined to dislike.

Todd Pittinsky of Stonybrook University has spent years promoting the idea of allophilia—the positive feeling of “loving or liking the other.” Feelings of allophilia can exist toward members of a different race, religion, ethnicity, athletic team, sexual orientation, work group, or any other category we may contemplate or construct. When I work with clergy who are quick to disregard people in their congregation whom they find difficult, I try to talk to them about allophilia (without using that term).

Leaders in other realms face comparable challenges. All of us need to look for ways to be positively predisposed to those who don't see the world the way we do. There's great long-term benefit in spending time with those who are difficult, warming up to them, engaging them, befriending them, finding ways to admire them, identifying goals to share with them. Tolerance isn't enough. Tolerating someone else doesn't make room for enjoying that person. It may be the warmest disposition we think we can muster at a given moment, especially if we're scared of the person. But one way to break down fear is to become more curious. Developing curiosity is wonderful for discovering what gives other people joy.

Part of the genius of Martin Luther King Jr., it seems to me, was his refusal to speak of nonviolence as an end itself. Stopping hatred may be vital in a world strewn with conflict. But for King, blunting something as negative as hatred was only a beginning. Not until we find the positive strength to love our brothers and sisters will the world become an abundant place for all.

Tolerance may be a necessity in certain political or legal realms of our diverse world. But elevating such behavior to default status will never be good enough for Jesus, who said, “Love your neighbor,” not “Tolerate your neighbor.”

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