

TERNASKY ON TOLERANCE

Douglas W. Shrader

Contemporary teachers are asked to teach a multicultural curriculum in a pluralistic society characterized by widespread disagreement, cynicism, and ethical relativism. It is a difficult and often frustrating assignment which has left many befuddled and confused. The pedagogic waters are muddied further by a slew of worries concerning political correctness, highly emotional and politicized debates about families and family values, and uncertainties regarding the proper application of the principle of separation of church and state. It is an atmosphere which fosters both permissiveness and conflict. Students are often challenging but unchallenged. As a result they may be discourteous, rude, and undisciplined. Many conclude, at an early age, that “anything goes” — any view, they assume, is just as good as any other.

P. Lance Ternasky, in a recent article in this journal, speaks of education as social transformation and envisions “a time when certain debates that currently rack the body politic will be viewed solely from a historical perspective.”¹ To navigate in the current waters, perhaps even to steer a course toward a less troubled future, Ternasky advocates dialogue, understanding, and tolerance. He begins by arguing that:

Tolerance is born of neither ignorance nor insecurity, nor is it the product of indifference. To tolerate a practice or belief we find innocuous or irrelevant cannot count as an act of toleration. To say that we tolerate broccoli or polyester is silly, just as it is foolish to say that we tolerate something we wholeheartedly endorse. For tolerance to operate, there must be disagreement and the issues under debate must matter to the quarreling parties.²

Ternasky’s writing is characterized by a clear, unapologetic moral tone. The tolerance he advocates is designed to apply to deep-

seated religious, ethical, and political differences.³ Perhaps simply because the stakes are high, because the matters under consideration matter more than most, Ternasky refuses to settle for an analysis of tolerance as a principle which guarantees the freedom to think, speak, or act in whatever manner one may please.⁴ For Ternasky, tolerance entails conflict and disagreement. It is not a simple matter of shrugging one's shoulders and mouthing the modern mantra: "to each his own." He explains:

Tolerance contains as a constituent the presumption of error, and it is characterized not by one's sympathetic acceptance of seemingly indefensible or offensive ideas or practices but by one's willingness to temporarily endure them. ...I tolerate your beliefs or behaviors because I cannot now convince you of your error.⁵

Taking this line of reasoning one step further, Ternasky asserts: "all ideas held strongly enough to warrant tolerance by another also contain the implicit desire to proselytize."⁶

To create and sustain an environment which promotes both tolerance and proselytizing, Ternasky advocates spirited public discourse guided by standard principles of civility and rational exchange. We should neither presume nor pretend that we have all the answers—or even all the relevant data.⁷ Even in circumstances in which we are firmly and seemingly unshakably convinced of the correctness of a given position, we must make sure that the debate is open to all.⁸ We must listen with an open mind and speak an open language, articulating our arguments clearly and forcefully in a style and manner accessible to the general public:

Every party to the debate is required to give good reasons — reasons capable of persuading the critic. Although one could conceivably have the answer, it would be lost to one's critics if one were unwilling to communicate in a language understood by all. The ability to persuade listeners that such reasons exist is dependent upon one's willingness to enter into an honest, energetic, and undominated dialogue — simply asserting the truth is never enough.⁹

There is much in Ternasky's account which I like. Tolerance, especially when paired with a commitment to dialogue and understanding, is a powerful tool for dealing with the uncertainties and confusions described in the opening paragraph. Without it there is little hope for peaceful and rational resolution of our most vexing conflicts, differences, and disagreements.

There are also elements of Ternasky's account which I find troubling. Perhaps simply because he has chosen to focus on the context of disagreement, the tolerance he describes seems incurably adversarial, even patronizing. Given the choice between talking and fighting, I would rather talk. But I would also prefer that the talking go beyond mere proselytizing, argument, and debate.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines tolerance as "the capacity for or practice of allowing or respecting the nature, beliefs, or behavior of others."¹⁰ In extreme cases this may be little more than putting up with something I cannot do anything about. However, we sell ourselves — and tolerance — short if our primary or dominant meaning becomes "I firmly believe you are wrong and will seek, at every opportunity, to convince you of the error of your ways." Such a concept is limiting rather than liberating — closing rather than opening doors.

I do not believe that tolerance requires us to continually challenge those whose views or behavior differ from our own. Sometimes we can learn more by listening quietly, with compassion, humility, and respect. Nor do I believe we are necessarily unreasonable or intolerant if we refuse to engage the debate on each and every occasion. Though Ternasky speaks alternately of dialogue and debate as though the terms were interchangeable, I find tremendous differences between the two. Debate separates you from me; dialogue joins us in mutual exploration.

The English term "tolerance" derives from the Latin "tolerāre," meaning "to bear." Though it can mean "to endure", "to bear" can also mean "to support." In fact, it is this notion of supporting or

lifting, not reluctant endurance, which constitutes the primary meaning of tel-, the Indo-European root of “tolerance.” The variant *tlā- becomes “Atlas” — the titan who, in Greek mythology, supports the world upon his shoulders.¹¹ If we are to use tolerance as a tool to build a community of mutual caring, respect, and support, it is an etymology we would do well to remember.

I also have reservations concerning Ternasky’s proposal of a neutral language.¹² I agree with his goals of clarity and communication, but fear the specifics of his proposal invite oversimplification, distortion, and perhaps most seriously: shallow understanding masquerading as enlightened truth. It is far better to cultivate a willingness to learn the language (values, heritage, commitments, and practices) of others, and to patiently teach them ours. Proponents of one religion (for example) can learn a great deal by cultivating an understanding, appreciation, and respect for the religions of others. But much of the potential value is lost if the goal is to convert or be converted (i.e. a substantial portion of the benefit involves discovering a richness which no single tradition can adequately capture or represent for all people). Similarly, we shortchange ourselves and set our sights far too low if our understanding depends on either (a) translating the second tradition into the language, beliefs, and practices of the first or (b) translating both traditions into some neutral, “non-religious” language (e.g. a mere description of x doing y on occasion z).

Finally, while I wholeheartedly applaud the links which Ternasky establishes between tolerance and understanding, I believe he may have been too quick to sever links between those concepts and freedom. In his 1859 essay, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill delineated four reasons for safeguarding freedom of opinion, and freedom of expression of opinion. They apply, with striking effect, to tolerance as well:

First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any object is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.¹³

State University of New York, Oneonta

ENDNOTES

1. P. Lance Ternasky, "Teaching Tolerance Amidst Disagreement", *Educational Change* (Spring, 1996), p. 118.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. — note, specifically, pp. 117, 124-125, and 128-129.
4. Ibid. — see, especially, pp. 119-120.
5. Ibid., p. 118.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 125-126, 128.
8. Ibid., pp. 125-126.
9. Ibid., p. 127.
10. *American Heritage Dictionary*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976).
11. Ibid.
12. Ternasky, op. cit., pp. 126-128.
13. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. The Library of Liberal Arts. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 64.