

## The Spiritual Discipline of Acceptance

I am deeply honored to have an opportunity to be able to speak with you today about what I'm calling the Spiritual Discipline of Acceptance. I am here with some of my colleagues as a part of the Human Rights Campaign Road to Equality, a bus tour across the country, with a focus on the midwest and the South. Lincoln is our third stop, from here we go to Kansas City and about 12 other stops after that.

I can say already, that this has been some of the most powerful work my colleagues and I have been privileged to do. As we travel in these "redder locations," we've been learning about the tight-knit and strategic organizing with which many of you have been engaged; it gives us courage and buoyancy as we carry nationally a message that many of you have been making locally. Equality matters. And building broad acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people matters. It matters just as much in Lincoln as in New York, in Birmingham as in San Francisco, in Little Rock as in Boston.

This has been a particularly soulful trip for me. My grandfather, an old fashioned, small town doctor, was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska before moving to Rockford, Illinois. He was a quirky guy who kept deadly snakes in his basement that sometimes escaped and in his free time he explored the earth's interior, slithering into unexplored caves with a lantern on his head, gray rubber boots, and a camera swinging off his hip. As a kid, I got this idea that people from Lincoln were a little weird, slightly dangerous, but always fascinating.

Reflecting on my Grandfather's life for this talk, I have become much more aware of how much I learned from him about acceptance. As a doctor, he was the kind of guy who would see anyone--never thought to ask if they had money or not--and was gentle and caring to those who didn't quite fit with Rockford's social mores. Without a lot of showmanship, he built a practice that drew misfits and social outcasts--people who knew they could go to him without being judged.

It is the ability to suspend judgment, even if temporarily, in the interest of trying to create a more loving community that I think is at the heart of acceptance. Acceptance is not something that some people magically exude while others stingingly withhold. For all of my grandfather's magnanimity in his practice, he could be aloof with his children, often making them feel like they had to perform to gain his acceptance. Acceptance is context-specific and it challenges the best of us in ways we often don't like to admit.

I want to posit that as a species our humanity needs to develop practices of acceptance in ways we never had to before because our connections with each other are becoming scarily more evident--one only needs to look at climate change to see this-- while our disagreements are becoming more ferocious and dangerous. It is my belief that developing a spiritual practice around acceptance has enormous implications for the LGBT community but for other communities as well, in ways we cannot fully fathom.

I want to explore what I mean by acceptance through three stories that I hope show its promise and its challenges from multiple vantage points. All three of these stories are played out against the backdrop of religious communities. Even given the seismic damage of rejecting behavior

done by some in the name of religion, religious communities remain the most fertile ground we have to practice acceptance. Our congregations are the places where Americans gather with people from different walks of life to figure out how to live their faith communally. People in religious communities are accountable to one another and it's regular accountability that makes the practice of acceptance possible.

**Story I: Acceptance as a love affair.** This is my own story but, I think it is fairly typical of people who have found a welcoming congregation after being an outsider. About 10 years ago, I was working to complete a long drawn out dissertation in English literature--what my brother referred to as my search for the holy grail. I grew up in an academic family and the shame of being stuck in ABD purgatory took on larger than life proportions in my brain. I had perfected a pattern of avoidance--I avoided my family--for five years I missed family reunions, weddings, any event where I would have to explain myself; I avoided the English department; and I had cut off ties with many old friends. Being a lesbian without kids and a husband in tow, compounded my low self worth. My family had by that point come to terms with my sexual orientation but it didn't come with value added. I was certain everyone who knew me was whispering, what does she do with her time. I finished the dissertation because my shame over the looming possibility of not completing it gradually became a little more unbearable than the fear of having to face the firing squad in my brain--known as my dissertation committee. This was not a particularly powerful graduation process and I left school aimless and depressed. I was in desperate need of acceptance and I found it at All Souls Church Unitarian in Washington, DC.

I remember vividly the first day I walked into the church. It was the Sunday after 9/11 and the congregation was reeling in the aftershock. I sat in the back of the church alone and I cried--I cried for myself, I cried for those who were lost and their families, I cried for the uncertainty surrounding our country, and I cried out of a general amorphous misery. A woman I never met came up to me, put her arms around me and sat with me for a few minutes, holding my hand. That simple gesture changed my life. I had never felt so accepted by a stranger before. It gave me a new community and a new purpose. This was a place that practiced what it professed--that all humanity had worth and dignity and that the Divine lived in all of us. The important questions were not how smart, successful, rich, beautiful, thin, or able you were. In fact, I found that the first question was no question at all but rather simple acceptance. Church was a transformative experience for me--it was akin to a love affair. I got involved the first day I went and never looked back. Church became my life and my work at the Human Rights Campaign is simply a paid extension of this work with my church.

My dewy eyed view lasted for a number of years until I started to explore Christianity and all of a sudden this welcoming place that had opened its doors to me and my partner felt somewhat hostile and judgmental. Completely open about my sexual orientation I found myself checking what I said publicly about my faith journey. Welcome had its limitations they weren't about sexuality in my case but they were there all the same.

**Story II: Accepting the ambivalent.**

This story comes from Krista Tippet's "On Being," but it resonates across faith traditions and geographies.

A white English kid is best friends with a Pakistani Muslim kid. The Pakistani kid who's straight knows that his best friend is gay and he's still his best friend. He's having a birthday party, and the friend says to him, "I'm not coming in because you promised to tell your parents that I was gay and you haven't done it. This is my ultimatum. I'm not coming in."

Finally, the father comes outside and asks his son's friend, "What are you doing outside?" The boy tells him "I'm not coming in because your son won't tell you that I'm gay." The man responds, "You know, Islam means a lot to me and when I go to mosque on Fridays, it's one of the great moments in my week." "But I don't understand everything. One thing I do understand is that you're my son's best friend, so please come in." Now in this instance the father never suggested he had to give up his faith for his son. His message was much more complicated--his faith matters to him and his son matters to him but he refuses to place one over the other. Love for his son gives him the room to accept his son's best friend. It does not resolve his religious misgivings about homosexuality but it does complicate them.

Two days ago we had a conference in Omaha called Pathways to Acceptance; I believe some of you were there. At that conference we featured Dr. Caitlin Ryan's work on LGBT adolescence through her organization the Family Acceptance Project. I encourage you to check it out as her research is positioned to completely change how we think about family systems. Caitlin has shown that when young people's sexual orientation or gender identity is rejected by their parents or caregivers they are 8 times more likely to attempt suicide, 6 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3 times more likely to use illegal drugs and 3 times more likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. Additionally the number of LGBT youth who believe they can be happy as adults moves from 35 % when youth feel rejected to 92% when they feel extremely accepted. This is an extraordinary range. Equally extraordinary, however, when kids felt that they had even a little acceptance their belief in their future happiness shot from 35% to 59%.

Now in this story of the Muslim dad, the father has a straight son but the message about acceptance applies as well. By opening the door to his son's friend he is showing his acceptance and love for his kid even if he refuses to repudiate the prevailing teaching of Islam on sexual orientation.

The genius of Caitlin Ryan's methodology--what has enabled her to get in the door of much more conservative spaces than many--is that she doesn't assume that one faith is better than another. She starts with the premise that most people love their kids. It doesn't matter if they are United Church of Christ or the very fundamentalist Church of God and Christ, love of our children is not predicated on whether someone is liberal or conservative. She shows that many of the rejecting practices parents employ--like telling kids not to associate with other LGBT friends, or to not tell anyone about their sexual orientation and gender identity--are not on the face of it morally right or wrong, they are protective behaviors that have negative ramifications for our kids. When we can understand this, we can get that acceptance often has to be about holding ambivalent views at the same time.

### **Story III: Extending Acceptance to those who offend us**

Recently at a faith advocacy panel, a Lutheran pastor, lets call him Steve, spoke about an experience he had in St. Louis. At that time Steve was not yet a minister and was asked by a colleague about where he worshipped. Steve's church was known largely for the African American neighborhood where it was situated Steve is white and the person he spoke with, also white, felt entitled to make racial slurs about the kinds of people who would go to Steve's church. Steve's call to ministry came from his work at this church--it was his spiritual home and he was deeply offended. Yet he did not yell and walk away or do what many good midwesterners do--politely change the conversation--he spoke honestly about how this church was changing his life, about the profound racial justice work he was privileged to be a part of, and about how being a part of community with people who had reason not to trust him was turning him into a more trustworthy person. His found God through his work with this congregation and he spoke about it with utter conviction. He had many subsequent interactions with this man and he never backed down from his convictions but he never left the conversation either. This guy eventually ended up going to the church and became a member.

Acceptance in this story did not mean that Steve acquiesce to the racism he was encountering but it also did not authorize him to run in flight. He stayed in relationship with his colleague even as he was uttering repulsive statements that were exactly contrary to what Steve's church was trying to create. Acceptance in this case had nothing to do with shared understanding or with finding common ground, but with a shared idea of our common humanity. As Steve reflected on this in our panel, ultimately we have to keep the big picture of what we are trying to do in community in our vision. It is not enough to try and create a beloved community if we refuse to engage those who are antagonistic to the enterprise. We do nothing if we only create safe clubs to hang out in, we have to be about change and that means accepting the humanity of others even as we vehemently disagree with them.

My job at the Religion and Faith desk at the Human Rights Campaign is to be a catalyst for people of faith who are creating accepting communities, particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. I think every day of what we might need to do to get people to become more accepting and about how religious beliefs both build acceptance and fuel intolerance. When I consider how religion was a life jacket for me, I am pained by how it so often drowns others by forcing them to choose between their sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious community. It is tempting for me to dismiss all conservative religious traditions as bigoted and hateful. But I have to understand that my reaction, easily justified, actually perpetuates intolerance.

A discipline around acceptance needs to start by understanding that acceptance is not a final destination point but a process and it has as much to do with tolerance as it does with love.

Now few people who are struggling to be treated with respect and dignity want much to do with tolerance. Tolerance is kind of like going to the dentist--you don't like the big Novocain needle going in the side of your mouth but you'll tolerate it because the pain of the cavity is worse. In many of our main line churches and synagogues we have a situation where people will tolerate LGBT folk in their congregations and even in leadership like a Novocain needle because the

disruption to church cohesion is not worth creating waves. Tolerance for those being tolerated often feels tepid and slightly disdainful, it rarely inspiring or seemingly transformational.

Yet I want to argue that tolerance takes us a good deal closer to the spiritual discipline needed for true acceptance. If you have ever tried to maintain any kind of meditative practice, if you have ever tried to write a paper, or learn a new sport you know that you have to tolerate your mind going off in a hundred and one different directions, you have to tolerate your legs fidgeting, your overwhelming sleepiness, the sock drawer calling you to sort it out--we often will do anything except the thing in front of us that matters the most.

Part of being able to live more fully and more meaningfully means tolerating the part of us that wants to run kicking and screaming from that which matters most. Exploring this topic is the most important intellectual, spiritual, and emotional work for me right now but I still wrote this talk in the wee hours of the night after I had exhausted all the other "critical" tasks I had to do. Tolerating the discomfort of exploring in writing what I care about most takes a spiritual discipline and it is a constant work-in-progress.

Tolerance in the context of acceptance is not about tolerating other people but about tolerating the barriers in our own minds and hearts that keep us from finding ways to truly connect with each other. This capacity to tolerate our own desire to flee from difficult conversations or to be honest with ourselves about our discomfort with difference--no matter how it shows up--is exactly the muscle we need to develop most.

But to tolerate the uncomfortable in order to create truly accepting communities can't be an end in itself--the only way for tolerance to not morph into polite avoidance is if we are tolerating for the sake of a deep love that is as significant to us as to those we are finding ways to accept. Ultimately the spiritual discipline of acceptance is about the practice of nurturing love in community. It was the love for his new community and the multiracial experiment they had embarked on together--an experiment that was never meant to remain within the walls of his community-- that helped Steve stay in relationship with someone who offensively discounted the work. It is the love that the Pakistani dad has for his son **and** for his faith that creates a new conversation in Islamic communities; it's the love I have for my congregation that keeps me within the Unitarian world while my faith journey often pushes up against the comfort level of many in my community. Loving better is a commandment at the heart of all faith traditions but it isn't an easy platitude, it's about tolerating our own desire to run, to hide, to act out so that we might get a glimpse of the divine in each other and we might have a chance of building a new kind of community where all of us, in our full and complex and contradictory humanity are welcome. This practice of tolerance in the service of deep love is, I believe, the work of acceptance, it is the work our faith communities are uniquely called to lead, and there is nothing more needed or profound we can be doing right now.