The importance of tolerance in a divided world

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We are living through a period of global transition. New centres of power and economic dynamism are emerging. Technology is connecting us ever more closely, and cross-cultural exchanges are deepening every day — but this does not mean there is more understanding. Societies are more diverse but intolerance is on the rise in too many places.

Across the globe, nations and communities face profound and enduring economic, social and environmental challenges. Poverty, hunger and disease remain at unacceptable levels. Every region is experiencing the rising impact of climate change. Natural disasters are a constant reminder of human vulnerability. Conflicts and inter-community tensions persist across the globe. Millions face the daily threat of violence and displacement.

Tolerance as a trait is something most people would assume innate (naturally) to themselves. I doubt anyone when asked would declare themselves to be intolerant. Many of us would affirm our tolerant credentials, and wax lyrical about our high-mindedness whether it were actually true or not.

Unfortunately, real-world evidence suggests we aren't as tolerant as we think we are. In recent years society has become divided on a variety of grounds, and our digital spaces often seem little more than pits of hatred and rage. Injustice wherever it is found can quite rightly inspire anger and a drive for rapid change. However, on an inter-personal level, many of us draw our lines in the sand, surround ourselves with like-minded people, and open fire on anything beyond our moral borders.

Too often, whether online or in public debate, if disagreement occurs, one person will swiftly attack the other. Sometimes, especially where high-profile women and people from minority backgrounds are concerned, this can lead to torrents of online abuse. We might like to think this behaviour is the domain of far-right thugs and internet trolls but it isn't. There are people from across the political spectrum who will readily embrace tribalism and rain scorn upon those who don't share their views. Until we can wrest ourselves away from this mindset, we risk creating a society steeped in confirmation bias, insular viewpoints, and of course, intolerance.

How to create a more tolerant society

For all the abuse, hate, and toxicity in public life, the situation is not hopeless. By starting with ourselves and taking honest, considerate steps, we can all help create a more tolerant and respectful society.

1. Listen

One of the most important things we can do is simple: listen.

All too frequently in the public sphere, listening appears to be just a polite period of silence before an individual starts speaking again. Yet taking the time to listen to what someone has to say and engage constructively is a critical tool in fostering greater understanding and respect between people.

You don't win hearts and minds by screaming in someone's face. Opinions don't often shift when met with hostility, they harden and become entrenched. By committing to actively listening to each other, even if we end up disagreeing, we can achieve greater tolerance and instigate progress.

2. Reflect

Reflecting on a person's viewpoint and trying to understand why they think the way they do reaps greater rewards than bluntly condemning it out of hand. Belittling someone for having a contrary opinion won't convince them to change their mind, but a thoughtful discussion might.

An additional but important facet to this is the capacity for self-reflection.

Why do you think what you do? When was the last time you interrogated your own beliefs and opinions? Understanding where your own beliefs come from will help when you begin to question those held by others.

3. Learn

Knowledge is power. By seeking out quality information and learning about the lives of others, we can attain greater mutual understanding. Talk to your colleagues and friends about their different perspectives and experiences. Learn how to support workers with protected characteristics with our equalities resources.

Tolerance can, and must, be learned. We need to teach girls and boys not just how to live together but how to act together as global citizens. We need to nurture tolerance by promoting cultural understanding and respect — from parliaments to the playground. We need to tackle growing inequality and reject social exclusion based on gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, and ethnic or religious background.

Tolerance is the strongest foundation for peace and reconciliation. At this time of rapid and often bewildering change, it has never been so important. On this International Day, I call on national and community leaders — and all those who wield influence through traditional and social media and among their peers — to embrace tolerance as the bond that will unite us on our common journey to a peaceful, sustainable future.