IDENTITY, SECURITY AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS: THE IMPACT OF INTOLERANCE

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Bernie Farber argues that in any society mere tolerance towards one another is not enough. Civility and respect are the basic factors needed for a harmonious society and populations should go above and beyond that to ensure their own sense of happiness and freedom. Today, unregulated, un-moderated online confrontations and commentary happen much too easily and it is important for Canadians to not stoop to that level, but rather to engage in thoughtful, respectful civil discourse. Civility is not a weakness, but a necessary component of a healthy, vibrant society.

I never really liked the word "tolerance." It suggests the bare minimum. Simply tolerating each other is far from accepting or, better yet, celebrating each other. In the end "tolerance" is not much of a value statement.

It's for that reason that we have a responsibility to aim higher, and that means that we not only develop an acceptance and respect for those who are different from us, but also for those who hold different opinions. It also means that we need to work harder to give people the benefit of the doubt. In both cases it means that we have to consider the impact that our words can have on other individuals.

My tradition is rich in stories that tell us of the importance of guarding our tongues. We are told that the tongue is so powerful that it requires two gates (the lips and teeth) to restrain.

There is an old Hasidic tale that tells of a man who spoke ill of his neighbour. Realizing his mistake he went to a rabbi and asked forgiveness. The rabbi said he would be forgiven but first he must take a feather pillow to the centre of town, rip it open and spread the feathers to the wind. The villager did as the rabbi asked. When he returned he told the rabbi his job was completed and asked for forgiveness. "*Now*," said the rabbi, "*go and collect each of those feathers.*"

"*But that's impossible,*" said the man.

"*Precisely*," the rabbi answered, "*and while you may sincerely regret the damage you have done, it's as impossible to undo it as it is to recover all the feathers.*"

Like those feathers, hateful words have consequences. On a human level they simply degrade relationships. In the age of Facebook, blogs and Twitter, hateful words become the bully's new weapon.

Instead of the threat of the fist, the intimidation comes in the form of words that can be distributed to potential thousands in the blink of an eye. And like those feathers, even with

hindsight and the understanding that a wrong was done, the words can simply not be retrieved.

In the past it was difficult for bullies to gain a public pulpit. Letters to newspapers were closely monitored to ensure that slander and intimidation were not published. Magazines and television likewise; the professional mainstream media for the most part undertook the responsibility to self-regulate. Today anyone can publish virtually anything. And sadly, more often than not, bullying and *ad hominem* attacks are de rigueur.

Here are just a few blog titles of the type of discourse that can regularly be found on some political sites:

- *Crazy Like A Muslim*
- *Church can't be bullied into accepting homosexuality*
- *Another fake Islamic hate crime; it must be Monday*
- *Stop Islamisization of America*
- *Phony Romanian gypsy refugees engage in crimes in Canada*

To be sure, the above quotes originate from the far right of the spectrum. There have been similar attacks from the far left blogosphere as well. And let's not forget the comment sections of some online newspapers which have become feeding grounds for racists, bigots, homophobes and those who slander without compunction.

Thankfully most newspaper comment sections are moderated and complaints are taken seriously.

It is though precisely these types of attacks on vulnerable minorities in Canada that creates fear divisiveness and promotes intolerance. Couple this with the ongoing "uber" attention paid by security officials, CSIS, RCMP and police services across the country to groups like Muslims, the Roma, Somalians and others and you have the makings of a perfect storm of building intolerance.

This is not to suggest that we tread softly on security needs it is however to suggest that our law enforcement, government and those wielding authority be aware of the circumstances of today and the effect of their authority within these minority communities the vast majority of which are peace loving loyal citizens.

As well please do not mistake this paper as advocating for uncivil behaviour to be regulated. Indeed, Canada has some very robust anti-hate laws that deal with the most egregious hate speech. My point is to make a case for what Canadians do best; accept the differences amongst us in society and rather than use bigotry and bullying tactics to debate, engage instead in vigorous, passionate civil discourse. It's difficult enough to be a minority person in Canada; it's far more difficult when the attacks are seemingly unending and no one steps up to the bat on behalf of those targeted.

During my close to 30 years of service with the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), I stood proudly by the fact that we engaged and embraced issues that our own tradition demanded of us. Shortly Jews the world over will celebrate Passover. There is a well known verse written in the Passover text that says:

> *"Let all who are hungry come in and eat, let all who are needy come in and make Passover."*

In many ways this simple verse sums up the responsibility people in general should have for one another. Explains Rabbi Tom Mayer of Aish HaTorah:

> *The message is that we cannot have true personal freedom unless we care about other people… Why is caring about other people so crucial to our own sense of freedom? Because we cannot get out of our ego unless we care about other people. A person has to get outside himself and realize that the welfare of others is part of his own happiness and freedom.*

My dear friend and past CJC colleague Eric Vernon hit the nail firmly on the head when he wrote of John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address admonishing both sides of the Cold war divide, reminding the world that "civility is not a weakness."

More than 50 years later Vernon expounded quite wisely noting "civility is an essential component of a healthy, vibrant democracy that encourages civic engagement and the frank discussion of opposing perspectives in the public square."

When it comes to civility let's not settle for mediocrity. And when it comes to security let not our angst and fear be the guiding light. Let's work towards true civility and acceptance.

I am often reminded of the words of a great Jewish philosopher, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, who wisely claimed,

> *"Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is like expecting the bull not to charge you because you are a vegetarian."*

It is thus incumbent upon us all not to harbour great expectations but work hard towards a society that treats its citizens with respect and acceptance.