

## Think Small: Making Your World a More Accepting Place

Mitch Craft - October 8, 2017

I invite you to stop and take notice of all the messaging in our society around acceptance. Call it acceptance, tolerance, open-mindedness... It doesn't really matter which synonym you choose, the messages are all around us. Schools design curriculum around these concepts, social campaigns implore us to accept those who are different from us, religious organizations of all sorts preach the gospel of tolerance, college campuses have entire departments devoted to the acceptance of diversity, and media sources seem to have a hay-day in this world of acceptance. So why, in spite of all this attention, does our world seem, on its surface, to be a less and less accepting place? And what can we, the individuals gathered in this room today, do to create a more accepting world?

I learned in a college linguistics class that the meaning of a word in any language is drawn from opposition. When we utter a word, we are not actually drawing attention to what the word is, but instead to what it is not. So let's think about acceptance in that context for a minute. Acceptance means what it means because it is not judgement, not bigotry, not prejudice, not close-mindedness. I mention these oppositions to acceptance because I think it is important for all of us to stop and think about what specifically we are trying to avoid when we work toward a more accepting world.

I'll take this a step further (and perhaps insult someone) by suggesting that there are two types of people: those who acknowledge their prejudices and those who try and pretend they don't have any. In other words, there are people who *think* they accept everyone and those who *know* they do not. [As a side-note, I love, for the sake of argument, to say "there are two types of people." Those who abandon their shopping carts in the parking lot, and those who wheel them to the designated area. Those who drive the wrong way, against traffic, through the YMCA parking lot, and those who follow the rules. I once had a friend respond by saying, "There are two types of people all right: Those who say there are two types of people, and those who know that saying it is wrong." Notice how her advice influenced me.]

So we've acknowledged that acceptance is a big theme in our world today, and we have taken a moment to define the concept (and what it is not). So it's time for my argument to veer wildly off course.

In my job, I spend a great deal of time trying to change people's beliefs and practices. As a school principal and now in my current role, a big portion of my job responsibilities involves trying to keep hundreds of professionals at the cutting edge of their craft. Well, I'm not sure if any of you have spent any significant time with teachers, but calling them a skeptical bunch would be generous. Too many educators still employ the methods that their favorite teachers

used back in high school or college, you know, like 20 or 30 years ago. And they can be very gun shy about change initiatives.

So in my pursuit of understanding how to effectively change people's beliefs and practices, to get them to abandon outdated approaches and adopt more effective new ones, I follow the topic of *change* itself. Through this lens, I came across a sociological study conducted in California beginning in 2009 and later replicated in Florida. The study begins with a well-documented phenomenon called the Backfire Effect. The Backfire Effect tells us that, when confronted with evidence that runs contrary to their beliefs, people tend to dig in their heels and become even more entrenched in their own ideology. This is the case even when the evidence strongly suggests that someone's beliefs are outdated, incorrect, or founded on bad information. People simply don't tend to change their minds based on evidence.

The studies I mentioned examined the outcomes of door-to-door, person-to-person canvassing on topics such as same sex marriage and transgender rights. The research findings reinforced that the Backfire Effect is indeed a real thing, but that 1:1 conversations between canvassers and members of the public had significant potential to change people's positions on deep-rooted moral topics. Through techniques of listening, posing questions, and guiding people to think through topics and verbalize their thinking, the second study concluded that canvassers can truly start to change people's minds and help entire communities begin to embrace the other side of an issue.

Okay, so how do these findings and the Backfire Effect relate to acceptance? It seems pretty obvious that acceptance of other people is generally tied to big picture political or moral topics. People harbor prejudices against members of an opposing political ideology, religious sect, socioeconomic class, race, gender identity, you name it. Everyone has prejudices, or areas in which they struggle to accept others. Even people who pride themselves in being progressive and open-minded often harbor prejudices against people who they see as lacking in these areas.

Groups often choose to battle intolerance through big-picture means and by telling others they should be more tolerant. They march *en masse* and carry placards. They develop media campaigns and share data that subverts the ideology of prejudice. They send mass emails and re-post meaningful propaganda to their social media pages. People, in fact, put a great deal of time, money, and effort into increasing acceptance by presenting the public with evidence that they should change. See how many of us there are? See how we are no different than you? See how we all deserve equal protections under the law? Sorry, but these approaches just aren't effective and the Backfire Effect explains why.

Just think of a recent time when someone either forwarded you an email or posted something to social media that ran contrary to your beliefs. What was your reaction? Did you read it thoroughly, thoughtfully examining your own perspective in light of this new and challenging

information, keeping your mind open to potential shifts in your core values as a human? Most likely not. Most people, when presented with information contrary to their beliefs, no matter how convincing that information might be, actually become more entrenched in their own way of thinking. So they either delete the email, relegate the sender to the SPAM folder, unfriend the person, or even decide to engage in a moral confrontation on the public battlefield of social media.

What I am suggesting is that things like gender-rights marches, to name one example, while they might create a sense of solidarity among supporters, accomplish little in terms of making skeptics more accepting. Publishing editorials doesn't work either. Nor do re-posts to social media or kneeling during the National Anthem or knitting pink hats or pasting a bumper sticker on the back of your Prius. These are all excellent ways to show solidarity with like-minded folks, but they unfortunately don't change anyone else's mind.

So how *can* you make the world a more accepting place? It's actually quite simple. The most effective tool you have at your disposal is *you*. Developing relationships with people with whom you disagree, and helping one another learn and move beyond ignorance, is the very best thing you can do to make the world more accepting. Drawing on the lessons of the canvassers, we can make other people (and ourselves) more accepting through 1:1 interactions, by getting to know them and making a genuine effort to listen and understand their beliefs. At the end of the day, it is human interactions and relationships that change the way people think, not information.

I've seen many examples of this, and I am confident that you have too when you stop to think about it. I have a family member who, on a theoretical level, has a variety of opinions and stances about groups of people. The interesting thing is that I have personally seen this individual interact with people from all walks of life and have never seen him treat anyone poorly because they are different or because they might fall into some specific classification. In fact, I'd go as far as to describe his interactions with those different from him as warm and friendly. Even with Democrats.

As always with me, my thinking on a topic winds up at school. Kids are interesting because they generally don't start with opinions of their own, or at least opinions based on any sort of experience. They often adopt the levels of tolerance and intolerance modeled at home by their parents. This particular audience of Unitarians, situated in a small Wyoming town, might find this alarming. Just what we need: another generation of Trump supporters out there running around, voting and whatnot.

But I am here to tell you that there is a great deal of hope in the youth of our community. I could recount hundreds of examples of our kids going out of their way to be kind to someone different from them, along with examples of kids defending peers that they feel are vulnerable on some level. While they might currently agree with the ideology of parents who've taught them that

interracial marriage is wrong, they turn around and treat the black kid who sits next to them in Algebra with respect and kindness.

I can also assure you that high school kids today are infinitely more accepting than the previous generations were. Twenty five years ago, there were zero LGBT students at Sheridan High School. This is half because social action groups had not yet invented the term LGBT, and half because there was no way that kids were going to come out. Today, things are different. There are students at Sheridan High School, in this tiny, rural, western, conservative town, who have come out and who are generally accepted by their peers. I believe this shift has come about for one clear reason. Over time, our children have gotten to know people different from them. They have formed relationships or worked on group projects or sang in the choir together and they, the majority, have come to the conclusion that they just don't care about the differences. They don't see differences as relevant or worth a ton of dialog. While there is still more work to do, at the end of the day most kids are pretty accepting and they will get after peers who display bigotry on any level.

Unitarians are all about celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of people. You are all about social justice and all about accepting your fellow humans in spite of differences. What I hope you take away from today's talk is that some methods are better than others when it comes to fostering the first three principles of Unitarianism. The very best way to spread these principles and make your world a more accepting place is through your human interactions with other people. Take a page from the high school students I just mentioned. They have no choice but to spend time with people from different walks of life and are therefore a pretty accepting lot. Taking the time to get to know people, and letting them see who you are, will ultimately lead to greater levels of understanding and tolerance.

Also, I encourage you to think like the canvassers I mentioned a while back. As active members of our community, our days are filled with interactions. Each time we interact with someone, whether fleeting or in-depth, we all have a chance to model acceptance and to engage people on a human level. And when we are presented with the opportunity to interface with someone of a different stripe, we should seize the chance to foster some dialog and mutual understanding through questioning and listening. These are the person-to-person interactions that made the canvassers successful in opening the minds of people and swaying the opinions of communities. They did not succeed by telling people they were wrong and that they needed to change. They succeeded by listening and engaging individual people on a human level. As Unitarians, and as caring members of our community, trying to increase acceptance through evidence and information just won't get you very far. But one-on-one, human-to-human interactions will.

If you want to make your world a more accepting place, I invite you to think small.