

Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives. - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Strengthening the Ethic of Tolerance

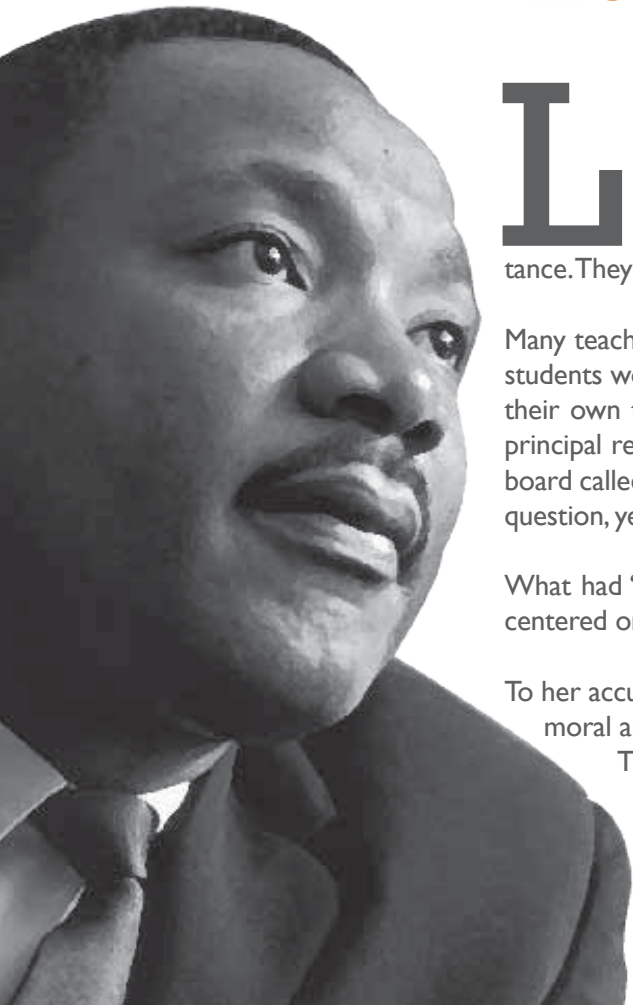
Lillian Sams* was doing what any good language arts teacher should—developing her students’ literacy skills. Her 11th-graders were reading books, watching films with a critical eye, conducting their own research, and openly discussing and debating issues of national importance. They were actively engaged in their own learning, and they thrived.

Many teachers would be envious of such life taking shape in their classrooms — students working on and thinking about schoolwork, not just in class, but also on their own time. Instead of being celebrated, however, Lillian was vilified. Lillian’s principal received angry phone calls from all corners of the country. Her school board called for an inquiry, and the district later denied she ever taught the unit in question, yet simultaneously assured the community it would never happen again.

What had “Lillian” done “wrong”? The powerful nine-week unit she taught was centered on the theme of homophobia.

To her accusers on the right, “tolerance” is nothing more than a code word for moral ambiguity, for “anything goes,” for a world without “right and wrong.” Those on the left also criticize “tolerance,” for in their eyes the word

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stops short of supporting actual respect and acceptance. “No one wants to be tolerated,” is a typical response.

“Tolerance is respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. Tolerance is harmony in difference.” - UNESCO

The Ethic of Tolerance

The word “tolerance” is surely imperfect, yet the simple truth is that the English language offers no single word that embraces the broad range of skills we need to live together peacefully. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used the Greek term “agape” to describe a universal love that “discovers the neighbor in every man it meets.”

In its Declaration on Principles of Tolerance, UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) offers a definition of tolerance that most closely matches our philosophical use of the word: “Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. Tolerance is harmony in difference.” Teaching Tolerance views tolerance as a way of thinking and feeling but most importantly, of acting that gives us peace in our individuality, respect for those unlike us, the wisdom to discern humane values, and the courage to act upon them.

In Lillian’s case, she found the courage to stand up against the inhumane and rampant anti-gay bullying she’d witnessed in her school, a reality that’s all too common. According to national studies, three-quarters of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) students report being subjected to anti-gay slurs at school; a third have been physically assaulted. As a result of such abuse, LGBTQ youths are more likely to skip school, possess lower grade point averages, and are less likely to demonstrate interest in college than their het-

erosexual peers. Furthermore, researchers have found that LGBTQ people are at risk for becoming the targets of violent hate crimes. Lillian’s students were not transformed into pro-gay activists, as feared by some conservatives, but they began to think more critically about anti-gay bullying.

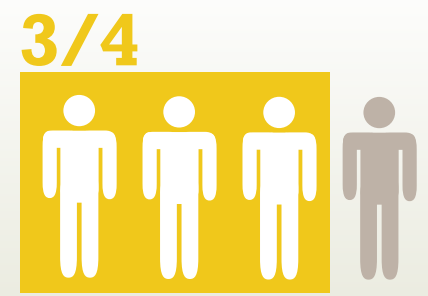
Clearly, acting on an ethic of tolerance is neither easy nor without risk. It’s also not limited to LGBTQ issues. As the 21st Century gets underway, our nation is still struggling to create “harmony in difference.” One might say the U.S. has yet to fully realize its promises of equality and justice for all.

A Premise of Dignity

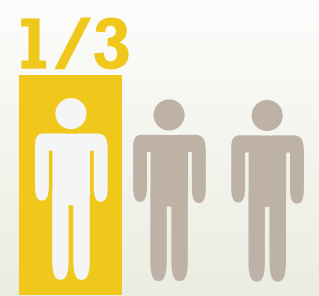
Consider what happened to Marie Justeen Mancha on a September morning in 2006. The petite 15-year-old was in her bedroom getting ready for what was supposed to be just another school day. “I started to hear the words, ‘Police! Illegals!’” she recounts, her voice characterized by a slow Southern drawl. “I walked around the corner from the hallway and saw a tall man reach toward his gun and look straight at me.”

Marie was caught in the middle of a botched immigration raid in southeast Georgia, in which federal agents barged into homes without showing warrants and targeted U.S. citizens of Mexican descent solely because of their skin color. Marie, her mother, and three other U.S. citizens

were plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. The lawsuit charged that ICE agents illegally detained, searched and harassed Latinos solely because of their appearance—a violation of their Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights—during an extensive campaign to drive them out of the area.



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In today's America, being brown means being suspect. "At times, I didn't want to be Mexican because of what we go through and how people look at us different and treat us and assume we're all illegal," Marie shared during the Congressional testimony.

Marie's experiences with stigmatization are not atypical; anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiment is widespread today. The FBI has catalogued a 40 percent rise in hate crimes against Latinos since 2000, while the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has documented a 50 percent surge in the number of hate groups operating in the U.S.

While people of good will can have different opinions about what our nation's immigration policy should be, the ethic of tolerance requires that race and racism have no place in that debate. Tolerance requires that we act consistently from a fundamental premise of human equality and dignity, and this is a premise that must hold true across issues, whether those of ethnicity, as with Marie, or sexual identity, as with Lillian's students, or other categories like gender, race, and socioeconomic status. From this premise, we are far more likely to discern humane values and to act upon them.

Acting With Tolerance

Surely, most of us can agree that rounding up people based on their skin color is wrong and that bullying students who are gay or perceived to be is unkind and harmful. The question is whether we are willing to muster this collective wisdom and act on these points on consensus. If we do, we not only can end some of the



Marie Justeen Mancha following the unlawful raid of her family's Georgia home

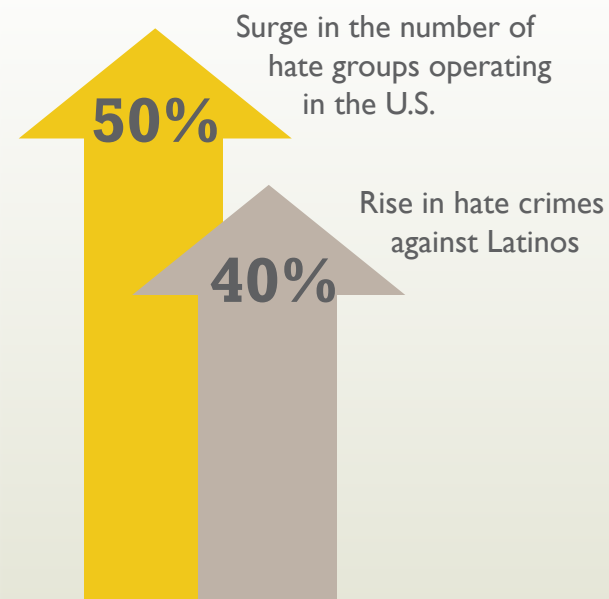
unfair and demeaning practices that marginalize individuals and groups in our country, but also increase the likelihood that we'll identify humane resolutions on politically charged issues such as how our federal immigration policy should be designed and how equal protections can be afforded to LGBTQ couples through civil union laws.

Looking at thorny issues like these, the trickiest part of exercising tolerance becomes clear: Acting with tolerance requires that we demonstrate "respect for those unlike us," and that includes working alongside those whose opinions differ greatly from our own. Teachers often recognize this need by approaching topics from "multiple points of view," creating opportunities for students to dig deeply into their own preconceived notions and those held by others. It is the essence of critical thinking, and we as a nation should take a cue from this teaching practice.

At a time when news programs increasingly are known for their dramatic flair rather than robust coverage of



Terrified family members look on as ICE officers conduct a raid of Swift Company, where the majority of workers were legal U.S. citizens



issues, and at a time when the blogosphere increasingly channels us into narrower and narrower, niche-based online communities, we are losing some of our ability to engage in civil discourse across lines of difference. We tend to inhale news and commentary from those most like us, what is sometimes called the "just like me bias." We also tend to live segregated lives—our friendship circles and neighborhoods tend to be filled with people who think and often look like us. While it is natural to gravitate



These students at Fordson High School in Dearborn, Mich., focused on acknowledging their classmates who may sometimes be "invisible" to them through Mix It Up at Lunch Day.

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to people with whom we share interests, tolerance requires that we purposefully expand our worldview.

Social scientists have long known that the best way to secure better intergroup relations is to promote contact between groups. This principle takes shape in places like Neve Shalom (Oasis of Peace) elementary school, an Arab-Jewish cooperative educational institution in Israel, and at Corpus Christi High School in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where the Education for Mutual Understanding program brings Catholic and Protestant students together. Closer to home, Teaching Tolerance sponsors "Mix It Up at Lunch Day" each November in our nation's schools. It is a simple call to action: Sit with someone new in the cafeteria; get to know them. Students, much like adults, tend to self-segregate, rarely breaking out of their comfort zones. More than 20,000 schools have participated in the event since its inception in 2002, and research has found that Mix It Up at Lunch Day helps

students become more comfortable interacting with different kinds of people and helps foster new friendships across lines of difference.

As grown-ups, we too can break out of our cocoons through the simple act of breaking bread with someone unlike us. We also can move that concept deeper by organizing purposeful dialogue about issues of importance.

Tolerance asks us to look at issues from multiple points of view and to locate, amidst these sometimes-divergent viewpoints, places where consensus and collective action are possible. In doing so, we can find peace in our individuality and respect for those unlike us, discern humane values, and find the courage to act upon them. And in doing so, we can push our nation ever more closely toward its tenets of equal opportunity and equal justice for all.

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