Free Speech and Tolerance

We hear a lot of talk these days about “free speech," which is a clipped version of the term “Freedom of Speech," a phrase that itself has its basis in the U.S. Constitution, specifically the First Amendment, the first of ten added to original document, and referred to collectively as the “Bill of Rights." The First Amendment states: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances*.

Free speech is not unlimited. A few narrow categories of speech are not protected from government restrictions. Such categories are incitement, defamation, fraud, obscenity, child pornography, fighting words, and threats. There are also other limits on free speech, such as time, place, and manner.

Free speech is fundamental to a healthy democracy. If we are to participate in our governance, we must be able to offer our opinion without fear of suppression or interference. Even vulgarity is tolerated, though certainly not encouraged, at least depending upon community standards. But when a person speaks at a public meeting, for example, he cannot simply speak for an indeterminate time, effectively creating an evening’s filibuster[1]. In such cases, one must speak on the subject at hand, and not ramble on about unrelated subjects. This is, among other things, rude, as others may be waiting a turn to speak. If the chairman intervenes, is that an example of government restricting speech? Perhaps, one could accuse. But the chairman is restricting the speech by limiting it to the topic under discussion, and is probably doing what members of the audience were thinking they’d like to tell the speaker.

But as ineloquent and disordered as people may be in expressing themselves, it is what makes democracy so special. Because we are a community of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and education, when we gather together to make democracy work, we are exhibiting that proverbial “melting pot” that has commonly been used to describe our country. What facilitates the blending of peoples and the sharing of their ideas and opinions is an ingredient called *tolerance*.

Human beings are very adaptable creatures, adjusting to physical and mental conditions as a means of survival, if not simply comfort. But for some reason, a lot of humans have difficulty adapting to living in proximity with other humans, often finding that because of differences in race, religion, or sexuality, their only means of adaptation is to avoid these others, segregate them, ostracize them, or in some cases, exterminate them, the epitome of *intolerance*.

The word *tolerate* means, “allow the existence, occurrence, or practice of (something that one does not necessarily like or agree with) without interference.” Note well: “without interference." One might ask, what gives anyone the authority to do any more than disagree with another who enjoys the same rights and freedoms as you? If the speaker is not exhibiting any one or more of the categories of restricted speech, are those ideas harmful, or dangerous? So much so that one feels the need to have the ideas censored or the speaker silenced? Or do the ideas just scare you?

Reporter Edward R. Murrow wrote that, “Everyone is a prisoner of his own experiences. No one can eliminate prejudices—just recognize them.” Good advice, especially when we are taking in ideas and opinions that are, if not foreign to us, different than our own. Developing tolerance, recognizing our prejudices while tolerating someone else’s, receiving those ideas with civility and equanimity, these are traits that identify an open-minded person. Some would call such a person a liberal.

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[1] A *filibuster* is an action such as a prolonged speech that obstructs progress in a legislative assembly while not technically contravening the required procedures.