

Beatriz Lopes UN Speech

I would first off like to thank all the people who make such a wonderful event possible; Dr. Post, the United Nation's staff, and everyone watching today.

Many people throw around terms such as religious tolerance without fully understanding the actual meaning.

The dictionary definition of tolerance is the ability or willingness to tolerate something that one does not necessarily agree with.

But as the old saying goes, it is much easier said than done. Tolerance is a high virtue that is not so easy to achieve, but maybe it is not quite high enough. Instead of just tolerance, we should aim for and speak about the 'acceptance' of the values of all faiths so long as they strive to do good and bring peace to the world.

To accept someone or something, such as a faith, is to show respect for and validation for who they are and what the faith consists of. If a faith is striving for peace and good throughout the world then there is no reason for discrimination and non acceptance towards that faith, but that is still very difficult for many people to understand.

Growing up in an international tradition known as Spiritism, I have witnessed how hard it can be for people to accept something they have never heard of, or if they have, that they do not understand accurately.

I am sure that many people watching today also have never heard of Spiritism, so I would like to take a second to explain.

As stated by Allen Kardec, the founder of Spiritism, "Spiritism is a science that deals with the nature, origin, and destiny of spirits, and their relation with the corporeal world." (What is Spiritism? By Allen Kardec). Even though this may sound too 'spiritual' for some, and many people still have a difficult time affirming the idea of an eternal soul, the truth is that the vast majority of people across the globe do believe that there is an interaction between the material and spiritual worlds. Even still, spiritists are not always taken seriously, when all we teach is the primacy of Spirit and love. We are much more about spirituality and love than about strictly organized religion.

People may be very quick to jump to conclusions and make assumptions about any spirituality and/or religion without even bothering to just ask much about it or do research, where they would have gotten lots of insight and understanding right from the start, and perhaps have been able to overcome any immediate bias they might have felt originally.

As human beings, we all have the tendency, at least every once in awhile, to believe that we are more knowledgeable about ultimate truth and reality than the person next to us. The majority of the time this results in a religious arrogance, when what we actually need is spiritual humility and an eagerness to learn about the beliefs and practices of others. As a matter of fact, the majority of the religious violence that we hear, see, and read about daily is the result of people thinking that they have the absolute truth so they therefore do not need to tolerate or accept anyone who believes even the slightest bit differently than they do.

Instead of asking people outside of our own tradition what they think and believe, we jump to our own conclusions and believe we are correct. As a result of this behavior, we find lots of statements that dehumanize, depersonalize, and even demonize people who just think a little differently than we do, even though they may well have their own beautiful way of speaking about God and love.

But why do we just jump to negative conclusions and make harsh assumptions even when we are trying not to?

Although we may be trying our hardest, telling ourselves to tolerate people, to tolerate religions and to tolerate lifestyles, we still have our biases and blind spots that just when we thought to ourselves 'Do not judge', we find that our hidden hostilities toward those who believe differently than we do comes up through the surface and into our minds. We end up judging the other even when we do not want to.

The key is that we need to be self-aware of this and learn to control it.

Everyone aspires to make the world a more tolerant place where people do not hate and/or harm each other over differences but rather celebrate all the wonderful ways that each unique spiritual tradition has to capture the underlying idea of a God of love, through scriptures, symbols, and practices, that inspires so many great spiritual founders.

Every tradition arose in a specific time and place in history for a specific reason, but behind all the differences in details there is the human sense of a higher power with whom we can connect with and live lives of freedom, creative love, and goodness. But we must dig deep and examine the ourselves, especially in these times of brutality and violence.

The only way to truly be a hero and change the world for the better is by changing ourselves.

How can we expect others to change when we have not yet changed ourselves?

What biases do I hold against people who seek meaning, purpose, and spirit in a way that is different than the way I was raised with?

Why is it that in the middle east many muslim and jewish children learn to hate each other by age 4? Why is it like that with the protestants and catholics in Belfast, Ireland as well?

Is this not such a shame? We have many scientific learnings that show that even very young toddlers express empathy and compassion towards those who are in need, yet children are being taught to feel differently, hatefully.

When will parents and society stop pushing the wrong buttons and start pushing the right ones that lead us toward a deeper awareness of our underlying spiritual oneness within an infinite mind of divine love?

When will we seek oneness through love and kindness rather than through extermination and genocide?

Religious tolerance. Such a complex ideal with so many potential solutions. But the key to being able to do anything is love. Without love, we will not get anywhere.

We must start with ourselves, love ourselves, so that we can spread our love and what we have learned to others.

It only takes one spark to start a fire. Once we start that spark in ourselves and spread it on to others the rippling effect will never stop.

Be the hero.

Be the spark.

Make the change.

It all starts with you.