

Today's holiday honoring the memory of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. made my thoughts turn to one of the words we so often hear regarding civil rights. That word is "tolerance," and as I contemplated the actual meaning of that word, I consulted the dictionary.

As it turned out, there are several meanings for "tolerance," and all are worthy of perusal. The two definitions that seemed to be most relevant to the holiday honoring Dr. King, though, gave me plenty to consider:

We hear the word bandied about rather often—"racial tolerance," "religious tolerance," "gender tolerance," "political tolerance." And the other meaning I noted is also important—"the maximum amount of pesticide residue that may lawfully remain on food."

It seems to me that both of these meanings have skewed our view of what is right and just, and that we have too long lived with these definitions used to encourage us to think a certain way or to justify the manner in which we view the world.

In the first instance, that of "tolerance" of differences in race, religion, sexual matters, and political views, a much better and more diversity-favorable word would be "acceptance." Tolerance, according to the dictionary, means that we adopt a "live and let live" policy. Wouldn't it make more sense to try to come to an understanding of the differences—why they exist; what harm, if any, they might cause; where these opposing views originated and what it is that keeps them alive; and most important, what it is in our own concept of self that sets us up to place ourselves at the apex of human worth and other people somewhere down the slope?

Sometimes, I have to wonder about the other meaning of "tolerance" that I particularly noticed. Could it be, I mused, that they are connected? Is the fact that there is a "maximum level" of pesticides allowable in food somehow linked to the rancor, hate, belligerence, and bullying that has come to define our society these days? Might it be that we really "are what we eat?" At the very least, it seems that corporate agriculture's willingness to poison the national food supply—though at an "allowable" level—indicates very little acceptance of the worth of each individual resident of this country.

One can only wonder what Dr. King would make of things going on in the U.S.A. these days. As we honor him with this holiday, it is something for all of us to consider.