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One of the most precious civic values in America is one that Americans sometimes take for granted: tolerance. This simple virtue has had an enormous impact on American history, and continues to be one of the qualities that sets us apart. Tolerance is the reason why members of such a wide variety of races, nationalities, and religions are able to live together in tranquility, despite differences which in other parts of the world have caused devastating wars. The Founding Fathers ensured it in the First Amendment to the Constitution, Martin Luther King Jr. worked tirelessly to encourage it, and in as humble a setting as my own daily life, tolerance plays an enormous role.

When America was still in its infancy, the First Amendment ensured that the government would be tolerant of its citizens, even those who disagreed with it or who held different beliefs than the majority of the population. In a single sentence, the amendment guaranteed tolerance of religion, of peaceable gatherings of people to work to change their government, and of the speech and writings of all people, even those who expressed views contrary to those of their government. While the nation was debating over the ratification of the Constitution, the promise of the Bill of Rights, which placed this assurance of tolerance before all else, was instrumental in gaining support for ratification. Throughout our history, the First Amendment has proven to be essential in battling intolerance and oppression.

One of America's greatest heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., advocated tolerance not only for members of different races, for which he is best known, but also for members of different religions or economic classes. He believed that "the good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human and, therefore, brothers." In resisting prejudice and intolerance towards African Americans, he encouraged peaceful and nonviolent protest, showing tolerance even to those who would not show it to him. His inspiring message was of vast importance to the American civil rights movement, and helped to gain the same tolerance for African Americans that was given to other American citizens.

In my own daily life, I am constantly reminded of the importance and the rewards of tolerance. The fact that certain friends are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or atheistic has not prevented me from forming valuable friendships with them and respecting their beliefs. By practicing tolerance in my own life, I can learn about and appreciate the cultures of those around me, and I can feel assured that they will do the same for mine. I accept that I will not always agree with those around me, but by being tolerant of the expression of opinions I oppose, I am able to broaden my own mind and accept new ideas. Today, fear of terrorist actions by Muslim extremists has caused some unease about the Muslim faith, the battle over gay rights is ongoing, and the large numbers of illegal immigrants entering the United States from Mexico has led to suspicion of people of that nationality, making the virtue of tolerance even more essential to our nation. Acceptance of the differences between people keeps American society at peace, despite the enormous variety of beliefs held by those within it.

In every American's day to day life, the existence of a gentle tolerance for others plays an enormous but often unnoticed role. That this virtue is so fundamental to our society as to be viewed as unremarkable is testimony to its deep importance throughout our history and in the present day. From the First Amendment of the Constitution to Martin Luther King Jr.'s fight for civil rights to my own daily life, tolerance has proven to be a value essential to being an American.