

Allure Article – for Sunday, May, 2009

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

I've been filling my mind the past few weeks with stories of the lives of some of the greatest leaders of modern times. One characteristic each one of them exhibits is respect for all human beings. Mother Theresa saw the beauty and love in the poorest of the poor. She lived among them. Martin Luther King Jr. fought for the rights of all African Americans, not just the rich or well-educated. Nelson Mandela became a champion for millions of disenfranchised black South Africans. Gandhi put aside his expensive clothes and big house to live as the people he served.

At the core of the life philosophies of these remarkable men and women is recognition that every human being is intrinsically valuable.

Consider the following scene. Does it seem familiar to you?

A wealthy Nigerian is on his way to a business meeting. He is running late. His driver is tense, focused on doing his best to get there quickly. Because of the chaotic traffic, the driver does not see a pothole in the road. A rear wheel of the car slams into it, jostling the businessman, whose shoulder hits the door. The businessman screams, "You idiot. How can you drive that way? You are a lowly fool. I pay you and this is what you do for me?" He raises his hand and hits the driver across the side of his head. The driver takes the blow quietly. He is humiliated and enraged. He feels he can't react: his family depends on his salary.

The driver finishes his work that day and begins his walk home. He is still furious. He is tired of the mistreatment. He is making his way along the crowded road. Approaching him is an unemployed, younger man. His appearance shows he is worse off than the driver. The young man's head is down. He is lost in his own misery. The two bump into each other. Rather than treating this young man in the way he would want to be treated, the driver explodes at him, unleashing a barrage of insults. "Dirty boy! Who do you think you are to bump into me? You are ignorant. Watch where you are going!" Thus, the driver repeats the cycle of disrespect.

The young man, already struggling, recoils at the abuse which underscores his belief that others see him as worthless. Grief and anger churn within him as he continues on his path. The young man sees a little girl begging on the roadside. As he passes, he spits toward her sneering, "You are nothing, you worthless beggar." Tears brim in the child's eyes. She is already overwhelmed with her plight as an orphan. The sting of this harsh judgment burns like salt in her already wounded spirit.

On and on the toxic cycle goes, infecting one person after another with hurt and rage. When will this cycle of disrespect be broken? Who will wake up and see what is happening? What we are doing to one another?

This interaction between the businessman and the driver is an actual scenario. I heard it from a Nigerian friend who lives in the U.S. He observed this happening on his last trip home. Because he has been

away from Nigerian daily life for a few years, this situation shocked him. (Please don't misunderstand me. Discrimination is alive in America too. However, it tends to be cloaked in more subtle forms.)

Why do we lash out in anger at others we see as "less than"? There are other more peaceful ways of responding, so why do these inflammatory, destructive reactions persist? At the core of our social structures lurk hidden beliefs, unspoken ones that very few of us have brought into full awareness. One is, "My wealth and position make me more valuable and important than someone with less money or status. Because I have more, I'm entitled to treat others with disrespect." Another belief is, "My lack of money and status make me less valuable than others. I have to tolerate disrespectful treatment." Is either of these beliefs true?

Is worth determined by finances or titles? Does any human being have the right to diminish another through insult and disdain?

Bishop Desmond Tutu offers a piercing insight, "Arrogance comes from insecurity, and in the end our feeling that we are bigger than others is really the flip side of our feeling that we are smaller than others."

Each of us has the power to choose how we respond to others. Any of those involved in the above story could have stopped the cycle. Why didn't they? Undoubtedly the answer has to do with the value they place on themselves and others.

Ironically, disrespect comes from those with poor self esteem, is tolerated by those with poor self esteem and reinforces feelings of poor self esteem. This need not continue. We can learn to see ourselves and one another in a positive, uplifting light.

Imagine the situation above unfolding in a different, more respectful way.

When the businessman's car hits the pothole and jostles him, he says, "I realize I am running late and I know you are doing your best to get me to the meeting quickly. But let's slow down a bit. The most important thing is that both of us get home safely to our families tonight." The driver nods quietly, appreciating the honest feedback and goodwill of his employer. He is glad to have a job with this man and says a prayer of thanks that he can provide for his family.

The driver finishes his work. He heads home full of gratitude. He is looking forward to an evening with his family. As he is walking, a young man worse off than the driver, accidentally bumps into him. The driver smiles at the young man and says, "So sorry." The younger man has been having a difficult day; he has no idea when he will have his next meal. This gentle interaction lifts his spirit. As he walks on, he thinks, "So many people are good inside."

The young man sees a little girl begging. As he passes, he catches her eye and comforts her, "Don't worry. Things are going to get better." The little girl lifts her earnest face in hope. It has been some time since this orphan received a word of reassurance from a stranger. That night, as she goes to sleep she thanks God for speaking to her through the young man.

Every word and action has a powerful ripple effect. What effect do you want to create?

Your assignment this week is to take a close look at how you view others and interact with them. You may not be as blatantly disrespectful as the business man, but pay attention even to ways you dismiss others in the way you move your eyes or body. Are you adhering to the belief that you are better (or worse) than others because of what you have or what you do? Or, do you believe that we are all

created equal and that each of us deserves to be treated with respect. Just observe. Notice opportunities to create ripples of love and respect.

Food For Thought

“Never take a person’s dignity. It is worth everything to them, and nothing to you.”

Frank Barron

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Patricia Omoqui is an internationally recognized inspirational speaker, life coach and writer. Patricia’s mission in life is to inspire people to move beyond fear so they can reach their full potential.

To share your thoughts about this article, please email Patricia at allure@patriciaomoqui.com or visit her at her website: www.patriciaomoqui.com .