

When asked what respect means, a plethora of thoughts rush through my mind. In my life, I have witnessed and experienced copious forms of respect. Even before I could articulately communicate, I obtained a certain feeling of admiration and appreciation for my family—the people that limitlessly nurtured and cherished me. As a young scholar beginning the journey of education, I gained a level of recognition and esteem for my teachers who invigorated me with valuable lessons. As I matured, I acquired the understanding of the profound importance of achievements and milestones made by inspiring men and women who became my role models. These feelings of appreciation, admiration, and esteem are crucial facets of respect. However, it has become clear to me that respect is not just these sentiments of praise and gratitude for awe-inspiring people and achievements. Respect is also a vital principle that demands to be felt by any person for himself or herself and others. Thus, respect is not only the utter regard I have for the people who inspire me with their characters, ideals, and actions, but also the unconditional recognition that every person has as a human being.

I believe that it is immeasurably important for a human being to be treated with respect. Stockwell Day once said, “As all human beings are, in my view, creatures of God’s design, we must respect all other human beings. That does not mean I have to agree with their choices or agree with their opinions, but indeed I respect them as human beings.” His assertion is an archetype of my sentiments, for I emphatically believe that any human being is the equal of another. In other words, not one human being has the justification to disrespect another. It is of utmost importance to be treated with respect, because quite simply, everyone deserves to be treated in this manner.

As an Asian American, I have experienced disrespect most profusely from racial disregard. From these encounters, I have learned that there are two general categories of racial

disrespect. While one is inadvertent, ignorant, and somewhat innocent, the other is intentional and malicious. Although both types inflict injury upon their victims, the first kind is considerably more comprehensible, for racial diversity is something that is not prevalent in a small city of West Virginia. It is the second type of disrespect—the deliberate type—that is the most evil, with its ability to cause inexplicable harm.

I will never cease to remember the first time I was intentionally disrespected based on race; I can recall this occurrence as if it were yesterday. At that point in my life, I was already familiar with the unintended lack of respect that accompanies any stereotype or generalization. I was not deterred by the unintentional disrespect, because I recognized that it resulted from a lack of understanding, rather than malice. It took only one experience, however, for me to realize that intentional disrespect does indeed exist. On this occasion, I was addressed by a racial slur. This single, simple word was charged with venom and horrific mockery beyond imagination. Turning instinctively to the speaker, I was confronted by an appalling scene; the boy was making palpable gestures, cruelly making fun of me. I was shocked, dumbfounded, and hurt. Too taken aback to form a coherent response, I fled. Later, still stunned from the occurrence, I asked myself what I had committed against this person with whom I had never conversed, searching for a reason to his blatant impertinence and abhorrence. I felt this disrespect to the greatest degree, absorbing the hatred from the person and feeling the effects of it—a lack of value and a lack of importance. However, because of this experience, I was enlightened. I learned that at times, disrespect will be forced upon any person with no justification and no concern for the feelings of the victim. My emotions of hurt and slight acrimony slowly vanished as I realized that I did not deserve to feel that way. I learned how it feels to be disrespected and the wrongness of feeling that way.

When I analyze that adverse situation, I acknowledge that I did not stand up for myself; I truly did not do anything. There are numerous ways I could have responded to the disrespectful person. I could have responded, as one option, with bitterness and hatred. For example, I could have retorted with a spiteful, petty insult toward the speaker. Although this response might cause the disrespectful person to recoil, it obliterates the entire philosophy of respect. If I were to insolently affront the person in that approach, I would be equal to that person; I would be guilty of the same charges. Thus, that is not the appropriate method of response. Another option, however, is to respond with the graces of dignity and discipline. I could have responded with a civil statement demonstrating my strong disapproval. Then, with the resolve and ideals of a genuine pacifist, I could have informed him of his disrespect.

In my opinion, respect does not stand alone; associated with respect are the values of discipline and dignity. Discipline is the greatest contributor to the cultivation of respect. I can recall the discipline my father and mother instilled in me throughout my early childhood. I did not comprehend the meaning of their instructions and actions at the time, but I later understood that they were teaching me the values of discipline. These values have provided aid to me in all my endeavors. Discipline gives a sense of humility, leading people to have respect for themselves and others. Thus, from discipline, respect is generated. An accrual of respect leads to the formation of dignity, for respect is the key to regard for oneself. In other words, respect is the fruit of discipline, and from respect, dignity is produced.

In conclusion, respect is an invaluable virtue with more power than one can imagine. Respect is not only the regard we have for inspirations, but it is also the regard that one has for oneself and all humankind. I have learned of the injustice of disrespect, and I have discovered that while respect has the ability to promote all people, a lack of respect has the power to destroy

466

all people. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "...we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds... We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline" (Aug. 28, 1963, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.), so must we as human beings, despite our differences and disagreements, take the notion to revere and thus, respect one another.