

THE STATE of RESPECT

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In many ways, respect among people is the foundation of civilized society.

We need to respect our institutions and leaders as well. But in today's critical world, they will have to earn it. And so will we all, for respect begins at home.....

It is a basic tenet of the unwritten social contract by which we live that all citizens possess equal rights unless they do something to forfeit them. It follows that all are entitled to have their fellow citizens respect those rights. Just as our system accepts that people are innocent until proven guilty, we informally accept that they are worthy of respect until they lose it. Used as a verb, the word means to "pay heed to"---as in paying heed to another's feelings and rights.

Not only does respect call upon us to take heed of the interest of others, it also decrees that we refrain from interfering with them. To respect people generally is to avoid insulting or degrading or injuring them when they have done nothing to us. Without this mass accommodation, there would be no hope of running a heterogeneous (dissimilar), egalitarian society.

The world, unfortunately, is littered with examples of the terrible things that happen when groups in a country fail to respect the human rights of other groups. But respect cannot be taken for granted; it must be earned.

What do we respect in a person? Any list would have to include attainment, integrity, fortitude, wisdom, skill, and courage. Above all, we respect something inexplicable called character, which brings together all of these traits. Perhaps the

closest anyone has come to accurately defining character was the Scottish theologian Cunningham Geikie. He called it "the stamp on our souls of the free choices of good and evil we have made through life."

We may, however, have a particular regard for a part of a person's character without appreciating the whole of it. One will often hear it

said: "I don't have much use for him personally, but I've got a lot of respect for his ability." Respect requires neither affinity nor affection.

A boxer once complimented his future opponent's courage in a paradoxical style when he said: "I have his guts, but I respect those guts."

There are exceptions to the rule of feeling respect before we show it which reach straight into the heart or our social system. A private who salutes an officer is according recognition to the latter's position of responsibility and leadership. We call the mayors of our towns and cities "Your Honour" no matter what we think of their ethics or capabilities. We might send a letter to a stranger addressing him as "Very Reverend Sir" in the absence of any evidence that he is actually worthy of our reverence.

All we know is that civilization demands civilities.

Such gestures amount to an unconscious acknowledgment that we live within a system that deserves our deference. We respect it because it respects us by upholding our human rights. For instance, we address our judges as "Your Honour" and rise when they enter the courtroom. In this way we do homage to a system of justice which---despite its occasional well-publicized lapses---warrants the high regard of those who live under it. It is instructive that when someone is cited for contempt of court, it is not because the accused has shown contempt for the person of the judge, but for the system the judge represents.

Respect for institutions is the cornerstone of the social compliance which makes a country orderly, law-abiding, and peaceful. We defer to our legal, political, and religious establishments out of an informed civility. As Edward Gibbon pointed out in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, this compliance is fundamentally pragmatic. He wrote that "public virtue is derived from a strong sense of our own interest in the preservation and prosperity of the free government of which we are

members." The Roman Empire, incidentally, began to crumble when its leaders forfeited the esteem of the citizenry.

Respect clearly cuts two ways. If people in positions which formerly commanded automatic respect find that it is lacking, they should think about returning more of it to the people. When we see politicians and officials abusing public money and businessmen and labour leaders determined to go their own way regardless of the effects on the community, we feel that we are being treated with contempt, and we are ready to return it in kind.

Yet in a democracy the people are ultimately responsible for the state of affairs. Anybody who complains that there is no respect anymore might as well be talking into a mirror. If, as some say, children don't respect their parents, if students don't respect their teachers, if there is disrespect for the law, we should ask ourselves where it all begins.

If there is a general lack of respect for the political and social system, it should be kept in mind that, as citizens, we are the system. In the words of the immortal comic strip character, Pogo: "We have seen the enemy and he is us." We cannot disrespect the system without to some degree disrespecting ourselves.

Self-respect is more than an individual concern. In this 1971 book "A Theory of Justice", the American philosopher John Rawls wrote that it is a vital social value. Rawls views society as a fabric woven of all the associations in which people participate. To contribute positively to an association, one must have self-respect.

Self-respect begets the respect of others in a group; at the same time, it is reinforced by the respect of others. Without it, Rawls wrote: "all desire becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism." How

true: the first thing that happens to people who lose their self-respect is that they lose respect for everybody and everything. People who despise themselves may go through the obsequious (fawning) motions of paying respect to others, but they are incapable of the real feeling because it can only grow out of self-esteem.

According to Rawls, shame is the guardian of respect. "Imagine," he wrote, "the example of someone who cheats or gives in to cowardice. By wrongly advancing his own interests, he has transgressed the rights of others.... His conduct shows that

he has failed to achieve the good of self-command, and he has been unworthy of his associates upon whom he depends to confirm his sense of his own worth."

The modern philosopher might have been quoting from the English statesman Edmund Burke, who observed that as long as shame keeps it watch, virtue is never wholly extinguished. What happens when shame deserts the scene?

Obviously, it takes with it the self-control which self-respect enforces.

In the absence of self-control, there can be none of the civil control upon which we depend for our security.

Fortunately, that sense of civil self-interest of which Gibbon wrote is still at work. People know instinctively that when respect is lost, chaos takes over. There was a danger of that occurring in Western countries in the 1960's, when radical youths rebelled against the elder generation.

Their dissatisfaction---disrespect for the system, really---found its outlet in violent attacks on authority in every form.

To a large extent, the 1960's radicals were revolting against the concept of respectability then current in both public and private affairs. It did not matter much what one did to merit respect as long as one appeared respectable. Extreme as their tactics were, we can thank the young crusaders for bringing shame on this social hypocrisy. The hard-minded iconoclasm of the media at present was one lasting result of their revolt.

Having done their work of ensuring that respectability must be founded in conduct that deserves respect, the radicals and hippies of yesteryear have become content to wear jackets and ties and display acceptable manners.

But in the atmosphere of openness which they created, it remains for society to build a new and more solid base of self-respect. This will only be done by placing a higher premium on individual character. We cannot demand character from our leaders unless we demand it from ourselves; for each of our lives is a thread in the fabric of mutual respect of which our society is composed.