

CUNY ETHICS AND MORALITY ESSAY CONTEST: VIRTUE

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## RESPECT

In every human setting, there are certain laid down principles which are considered vital to the social wellbeing of the people. These are the ethics and principles that serves as a guideline to the way the people live their lives and are generally accepted by earlier generations and are handed down from generation to generation. Respect is one of them, which this essay seeks to espouse into detail. As an African proverb has it; “if a man is coming towards you, you need not say ‘come here’.

Indeed life they say is a teacher. As long as we live, so we learn. A man who pays respect to the great paves way for his own greatness. This is why it is extremely important that as we grow as human beings and expect other people to respect our ideas, beliefs, personalities, and actions, it is equally vital that we are prepared to respect others likewise. Giving respect does not merely mean insisting that all ideas, beliefs and deeds are worth the respect we give, it simply means that we recognize and appreciate the basic fact of humanity and the personality of others even if we have different ideas and beliefs. Respect means that every human being was not created perfect and thus has lapses in one way or the other. It also means that our lapses as human beings present us with a golden opportunity to appreciate each other’s strengths and realize that each person has something to learn and each person has something to teach us if we are willing to learn. Respect is one of the key lessons that one learn from once own parents or the elderly.

Coming from Africa where respect for the elderly and other beings in general determines what family you came from, my parents ever since I was born, have always taught me respect

and why and how I should show respect to other people apart from them and the immediate family members, but every single human being who deserved to be respected. This brings in mind what William Conton, a Sierra Leonean educator, historian and novelist said about Africans; "Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness". My parents loved me a lot but will never countenance any act that smack of disrespect to an elderly person, brothers and sisters or any other person. They will discipline me for any act of disrespect toward anybody. These acts demonstrated by both parents sometimes get me thinking about how good their parents were too, and I often looked at them and say "you two were made for each other". This is because there had never been a day that they will disagree on teaching us something especially when it came to our relations with other people and our friends. Respect for the elderly and human beings in general has therefore been part of me ever since and it has been like a shield in my life.

I have always been guided by the upbringing that I got from my parents in every act of mine. Acts like saying 'Hi' to elderly, neighbors, and friends both at school and at work, helping people carry their heavy loads up or down a stair case, giving my seat for the elderly and kids, being careful about the words I use in my conversations with elderly and young and above all, respecting everybody's views, ideas and personality. All this acts are to the credits to my parents and the society in where I grew from which I am always and would forever be incredibly proud of. My dad will always say to me; "Shiraz, we are very sure that with the upbringing that we have given to you, we are always rest assured that you will go places and leave footprints, and anywhere in the world you go in one piece, you will return in one piece". These words in mind are like Christmas bells tolling and it pushes me to do more. However, it has not been always

rosy growing up and trying to show respect to people. My actions sometimes received strong opposition from some people.

A classic example of an obstacle to my act of respecting everybody and appreciating their abilities and disabilities is about a boy in my class when I was in High School in Ghana. This boy was called Adam who hailed from a troubled family. They were poor, the worse part of his story life is that his parents got divorced when he was only eight years old. Therefore he never actually enjoyed the company of a family that was intact and eventually lost his father. He was left under the care of a poor single mother who had to work on people's farms just to take care of Adam and his two younger siblings. These harsh circumstances affected Adam's generally performance in class. Adam's siblings had to be withdrawn from school. Narrating his ordeal to me one time I decided to speak to him, he said his mother said she had to withdraw his siblings from school just to pay Adam's school fees as she could not pay for the three of them even if Adam helped her work on the farms. They could not raise enough money to pay for their fees and provide for the upkeep of the house.

Adam always came to school in dirty uniforms and shoes, and sometimes had no pocket money to buy food. He had to always run errands for other students in order to eat what they had left over. I never liked the manner in which he was being treated and disrespected by other students including some of whom I called my friends. They belittled Adam at every opportunity they got. They used him as reference point for most of their jokes even though some of them were not the brightest I could talk of. Some of them one could think that with a little bit of attention, care, and respect, Adam will become brighter than them.

I started first of all by making sure that I sat on the same desk with him in class, study with him, and try to explain certain things he did not understand, making him join my study group, went for lunch with him and walk with him everywhere on campus and visited him in his house after school and on weekends. I ate in the same plate with him in his house to the dismay of his mother who taught nobody would want to be friend with her son or even eat in the same plate with him. My parents always invited him and his younger siblings over to our house on weekends to stay for hours and Adam sometimes passed the night in our house. My father always bought shoes for us and my mother made sure he was given the right detergent to keep his clothes clean at all times.

My friendship with him was always a struggle to some of the students who never respected Adam for who he was. It was always a hard feeling to see some of the students and some of them who claimed to be my friend walk up to us and say mean comments to Adam and walk away. That always left him feeling a bit awkward and embarrassed. Some of them stopped talking to me or walking with me both in school and after school. Some of my friends stopped paying me visits in my house because they did not like to be seen with Adam. I used to get worried but after I thought about again it was never a thing of bother for me. There and then a popular phrase came in mind that says; "birds of a feather flock together", which meant that people of same interest and character move together. I figure out that Adam and I were people who were meant to be friends by our ideology and way of thinking, which was to respect and appreciate every human regardless of their gender, ethnicity, color, religion, or social status.

These act from me, my family and a handful of my friends who had mended their ways of treating other people, had slowly but surely started to manifest. Adam suddenly became more comfortable in socializing with other people. His academic performance was suddenly amazing and when we wrote our final exams, Adam passed in all eight subjects recording grade 'A' in five subjects, 'A' minus in one, and 'B' plus in the other two. He gained admission into one of the premier universities in Ghana thus "Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology" to study medicine and was sponsored by the member of parliament of our town who had promised he would sponsor students who got five 'A's. That was the same year I came to the U.S. I still remember the words Adam said to me when he came to see me at the airport. He said; "Shiraz, words in the whole world will be inadequate to thank you for what you and your family have done for me, all I can say is God bless you and bless our friendship for standing by me and respected me for who I was and not for what I had". Tears uncontrollably rolled down our faces like never before. At that moment, the reality of what Maya Angelou of blessed memory, a famous author, poet, dancer, actress and singer said dawned on me, which states that; "I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel".

This brings in mind a story of what happened at my first workplace some time ago. There happened to be this boy at my workplace where I worked as a cook. He seemed to be the target of every single person in the kitchen simply because he was a bit slow in getting the food out on time for the guest. All sorts of word were being used on this boy. At some point I was getting tired of what was going on. I decided to speak to the general manager about the happenings. I tried to explain to him that the kitchen was never going produce the best results in terms of making the guests feel happy by getting their food to them on time if order was not restored in

the kitchen. He asked me what the problem was. I calmly said to him “respect”. I said respect is mostly wrongly interpreted only to mean helping people carry their loads, giving up a seat on a bus, or saying good morning or afternoon to people, but it was way more than that and that was what we were lacking in the kitchen. I said to him respect includes identifying someone’s strength and weakness, respecting them and encouraging him or her to do more in order to meet the set goals. I then brought in the boy’s case and said that calling him names and putting him in the spotlight for the bad reason was never going to help him develop, but rather kill his morale to improve as he was always going to feel disrespected and not valued as someone who could ever get better.

A meeting was summoned by the managers to speak to the issue and the need for us to respect each other in order to bring the best out of every body. They encouraged us to do more when it came to using what I personally describe as “magic words”. Words like “please”, “thank you” were words that could make every individual feel respected and valued which could push them to improve on their weaknesses. One afternoon the boy walked up to me after we had finished our shift and asked me why I was always polite to everyone even those who annoyed me. I replied by saying; “respect”. Respect everybody who is above you, below you, equal to you and even those who annoy and hate you, your respect to them might be a positive turning point in their behavior towards you and other people. And for those who feel disrespected and devalued in the society, your respect makes them feel that they are people of value and that somebody sees something positive in their personality.

I have gained some satisfactions in my life from showing respect to where it is due. One major satisfaction that I can never become tired of is that, I have made my parents proud. They being the catalysts in bringing up the way did and taught me how and why I should respect

everybody I come across in my life, I wake up every morning and I thank God for giving the parents like mine. Whenever I show respect to people and they show appreciation, I feel satisfied that I have been able to live and demonstrate what I was taught by my parents.

Finally I always feel rewarded within my heart that by showing respect to other people, I have done something worthy of emulation by others. I feel that I have helped in shaping the lives of others and bringing up the best in others and myself, and making other people feel appreciated and loved even if no body paid attention to it. I feel satisfied that I have been able to make people understand that respect should be a complementary role that is supposed to be played by everybody in order to make the society a better place to live in. I am therefore determined to overcome any form of difficulty in my life by doing what is required of me but ultimately respecting every human being.



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4. I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel; Maya Angelou.
5. Birds of a feather flock together.