

Two

HUMAN RESPECT

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life.

—Extract from the U.S. Declaration of Independence
(drafted by Thomas Jefferson)

The first category of respect is human respect. This type of respect is inherent to everyone. At the heart of this level of respect are your self-respect and your value system. How do you value yourself? How do you value other people? How do you respond toward a stranger that you have just met under normal circumstances? How do you value human life? This is an attribute that your parents instill in you right from a very early stage of your life. This attribute is also forged, for better or worse, by influential people in your life as you grow older.

Let us take a reflective walk from your early years as a child to your current years and explore some of the key influential people who may impact your degree of human respect. There will be other people or specific individuals who may come to mind as you take this stroll; however, the people that I shall identify represent those

whom we typically take for granted or underestimate. I will also share a few of my notable experiences with you as we tread back through memory lane.

THE CHILDHOOD YEARS

First, it starts with your parents while you are a child growing up. This includes situations involving natural parents, foster parents, guardians, and caretakers. These people raise you and instill a value system within you at a time when you are highly impressionable, very dependent, and cannot provide for yourself.

There are many publications and books—on parenting and family—that capture and describe the degree of influence that your parents have over you during your formative young years. A simple application of cause-and-effect analysis demonstrates this. If, as a four-year-old, your parents continually yell at you and verbally condemn you for everything that you do wrong, you will likely grow up with very low self-esteem or very low self-worth. This may potentially translate into engagement in bad behavior as you get older—you may succumb to peer pressure to use drugs, you may exercise bad judgment that may cause you harm, you may turn to alcohol use as a way to rebel, or you may bully other people who may be less positioned to defend themselves.

Another case in point may be where two parents periodically engage in marital conflict that degenerates into a war of strong words and verbal abuse—all this while the children (or perhaps you) hide in the bedroom, mentally recording the whole event. This type of exposure can potentially diminish a young child's self-esteem. If parents demonstrate lack of appreciation or value for each other, it will likely be difficult for young children to develop strong self-appreciation and consideration for others.

Yet another common example is the case where both parents, or a sole parent, have a very busy work schedule, to the extent that very little time is set aside to tend to the emotional needs and support

of a young child. As that child grows older, he or she may have a tendency to turn to other people (such as peers or ill-advised role models) to meet their emotional needs.

I was raised in a very traditional setting, in Lagos, Nigeria. The culture was highly hierarchical, and emphasis was placed upon discipline and respect for your “elders.” This concept included respect for older siblings, older cousins, older relatives, and of course, parents. My parents instilled these values in me at this early stage in my life, with reinforcement from my extended family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, older cousins, and others.

My (late) father developed a reward system that I had no choice but to abide by. If I wanted something and asked my father, he would give me the money I needed to cover the purchase, on one condition—that I prepared what he called a Statement of Account to be presented to him afterward. This simple handwritten report showed three sets of figures—Income (the amount he gave me), Expense (the items I purchased along with the individual cost), and Balance (the change). He had taught me the process of preparing this report at a very early age (seven or eight, as I recall), and he expected it ready on the dining table when he returned home from work.

From my perspective, this was a great deal! I could ask for (and get) almost anything I wanted as long as I was willing to prepare a “stupid” report—this was what I thought at the time. My father would methodically review the math (addition and subtraction) in the report, check my change, and review the receipts. I ensured that my math was accurate every time since there would be a negative consequence, otherwise. This went on all through my early teenage years. As an adult today, looking back, I truly appreciate my father’s effort and influence. It was his way of instilling accountability and appreciation for money,

not to mention the sharpening of my math skills—I never wonder why I love math or why I have always excelled at it.

At this very young age (birth through early teens), you really are at the mercy of others for developing strong self-esteem and a value system. Your parents hold the cards. If you have capable parents, you will develop a good value system and strong self-esteem and value yourself accordingly. This will enable you to value others and treat others with an equal degree of respect. On the other hand, if you have less-capable parents, you will likely develop a weak value system and low self-esteem or low self-worth. This in turn may hamper your ability to value others and treat others with a proper or fair degree of respect.

My parents placed a strong emphasis on education. Their belief was that a good education would serve me much more than anything they could offer me. I was fortunate enough to attend a private (Catholic) elementary school in Lagos. I excelled in every one of my courses, and this achievement bolstered my self-esteem at this very young age.

Despite my excellent grades, my parents still enrolled me and my brothers in after-school private tutorial sessions. This habit continued on until high school age. At the time, I did not quite understand the purpose of the tutoring. I always thought tutoring was for the not-so-smart kids, and at this age, any chore after school was unwelcome. Later on I learnt, from my mother, that the tutoring was intended to keep my grades high so that there would be no need for panic reaction to poor grades—a sort of preemptive strategy. Now I clearly understand how I was later able to graduate in the top five percentile of my high school class.



THE EARLY TEENS

As you grow older (through your midteens), and begin to interact more with people other than your parents and siblings, your degree of self-esteem continues to be shaped by people of influence. These people include relatives, teachers, clergypersons, and public-figure role models. Any of these people can have a position of authority or influence over you. However, your parents still exercise the most influence on you, your value system, and your self-esteem.

That favorite aunt or uncle, or perhaps grandma or grandpa, or even that close family friend, may strengthen or weaken your self-esteem over a period of time. This may occur through periodic activities or observed behavior that may negatively impact your value system. For example, suppose you visit Uncle John frequently to watch a fun game of football on television. This is a popular and simple enough family tradition in many households. During the course of the game, Uncle John, or other adults present at the gathering, becomes engaged in the excitement of the game and utter foul words and improper language. This goes on for months or years at a time. After a while, you find yourself uttering these same foul words in moments of excitement or routine situations with other people.

As I indicated, I was born and raised in western Nigeria, a region of the country populated largely by an ethnic group known as the Yoruba. The Yoruba culture is very traditional and communal. The family system extends well beyond parents and their children. Growing up, parenting involved, and still does, the extended family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and others. The family support system was extensive.

My parents maintained a tradition that I recall as far back as I can remember. It was an annual family holiday at the family