

Is “Respect” to be Earned?
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Calls for “civility” ring almost daily. Whether by a national commission, a gathering of clergy, or a newspaper commenting on big-city police, the calls are similar. They concern racism, “road rage”, bullying, and other forms of incivil behavior. I believe these cries for civility are calls for respect.

The urgency with which certain persons and groups demand respect is striking for several reasons. First, their demands fail to acknowledge that respect is a two-way exchange; second, they ignore the fact that individual and group respect are not permanent. No one can demand respect and expect the results to be honest.

It certainly is true that racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice are not only active in our society, but also deny respect to those who are the subject of discrimination and incivil actions. Therefore, it makes sense for those who have been subjected to bias and incivility personally or historically to want respect. Indeed, I assume that everyone wants respect as a simple fact of his or her humanity.

We should assert in our schools and houses of worship, and especially in our homes, that others should be respected for their humanity even if they are different from us. But there is a difference between respect for humanity at large; respect for ethnic, national, religious, community, and racial groups in general; and respect for any individual in particular.

Respect, in general, must be offered freely. An individual’s actions should no more reflect poorly on an ethnic, national, racial, or religious group than a group’s actions should reflect poorly on all of humanity. But respect in these larger contexts cannot mitigate the disrespectful behavior of an individual. This is the truth which some ignore. I respect you first as a human, second as an individual.

However, individual respect can be regained through effort: by being sincere and helping others, by showing concern, by acting as part of a group which is trying to be positive.

Respect is lost by acting in a callous manner, by disregarding others, by insincerity, or by belittling the place and relevance of others. When a student or a faculty member or lay member of the public “demands” respect, and does so in a manner which itself is disrespectful, he or she not only misses the point but also demeans the issue.

A college and university is a precious place. It is where truth in whatever form should be pursued without hindrance. It is where freedom of speech must be protected to the utmost. It is place where diversity – of background, ethnicity, nationality, religion – should be valued. It also is a place where civil discourse and respect for one another is essential if a full and honest exchange of views is to be assured.

Without common courtesy, ears are closed. When ears are closed, there can be no mutual respect. We must learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Those who shout the loudest for respect do the least to gain it.

These are difficult times, when relations between groups are strained. Often, the economy is blamed. I would hope that even in times like these, families, clergy, and teachers would prepare children with the basic values of civility, courtesy, sincerity, and respect for others. Our world needs it. Our national values – freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, democracy itself – will die without it.