

Respect: Today Or Tomorrow?

I was given the topic of “Respect” to write about, and I believe it’s an important subject to discuss—especially because it feels like it’s missing in today’s society.

Living in Oregon, I’ve noticed that many people don’t even CARE enough to show basic human decency, let alone genuine respect. For a long time, I asked myself, “Why should I respect people when they treat me like I’m less than human?” Over time, I think I’ve finally come to understand what REAL respect actually means.

Real respect isn’t just following directions, it’s not blindly obeying, and it’s definitely not accepting discrimination or harassment. Growing up, I constantly heard the phrase “respect your elders.” But elders often rely on the lessons they learned when THEY were young—and that’s where the problem begins.

When today’s elders were children, respect looked VERY VERY different. In the mid-20th century, kids were taught to obey adults without question. Respect meant listening quietly, following directions, and never talking back. Elders were seen as the source of wisdom, and their opinions carried weight simply because of their age. (Which my brain cannot comprehend) Many families lived with grandparents in the same household, and younger generations were expected to honor them and care for them. But respect back then wasn’t always healthy. It was common for older people to make comments about appearance or gender roles that today we recognize as inappropriate. Children were expected to accept those remarks without complaint, because questioning an elder was considered disrespectful. This shaped how many of today’s elders view

respect—they grew up in a time when respect meant obedience, even if it came at the expense of a child’s comfort or dignity.

Now there’s one tiny issue with that. Back when the elderly were young, it was considered normal to make harassing comments toward girls, and no one questioned it. But in today’s age, we’ve learned better. We’ve learned from those mistakes. Yet some elders still make comments about “pretty girls” or “handsome boys,” and that behavior can be frightening. It makes children, including myself, feel unsafe around older people.

This creates a real conflict: how are kids supposed to “respect their elders” when elders don’t always respect them back or take the time to understand what children actually value? Respect should go both ways. For example, a five-year-old doesn’t want a letter-writing kit to send notes to their grandparents for their birthday. They want toy trucks, dolls, clothes, or candy—things that show someone cared enough to think about what THE CHILD would enjoy.

But respect doesn’t stop at family—it affects our whole community. At the local level, respect is what keeps neighborhoods safe and schools welcoming. When people show respect, neighbors help each other, teachers listen to students, and kids feel like their voices matter. When respect is missing, bullying, discrimination, and division take over, and small problems grow into bigger ones. If we could do better, local respect would look like communities where kindness is normal, where people treat each other like human beings instead of strangers, and where every child feels safe walking down the street.

At the state level, respect decides whether laws are fair or biased. If leaders respect all voices, including minorities, they create systems that give everyone a chance—whether it’s in housing, education, or policing. But when respect is absent, racism and inequality sneak in, and people of color or specific groups end up facing unfair treatment. If we could do better, respect at the state level would mean schools that give

every child equitable opportunities, justice systems that don't discriminate, and leaders who actually listen to the voices that are usually ignored.

At the national level, respect is the glue that holds our country together. A nation built on respect protects the rights of all people, no matter their race, gender, or background. But when racism and hate dominate, the country becomes divided. History has already shown us what happens when respect is denied—segregation, discriminatory laws, and generations of harm. Even today, racism still affects national debates, from immigration to voting rights. If we could do better, respect at the national level would mean building a country that values unity over hate, celebrates differences instead of punishing them, and makes sure no one is left behind. (like the slogan for the stitch movie “Ohana means family and family means no one gets left behind or forgotten “

Respect, then, is more than just a word. It's a choice we make every day—at home, in our communities, in our states, and across the nation. When we practice it, we build stronger bonds and fight against racism. When we don't, we repeat the mistakes of the past and pass down division instead of unity. If we could just do better, respect would be more than a lesson—it would be a way of life.

Personally, I am Autistic (level 2). Yes, I'm considered “high-functioning,” but that doesn't change the fact that I am Autistic. People are often surprised when I share this, because I've learned to mask my personality so well. Yet when I let my true self show, others sometimes get frustrated, accusing me of “acting dumb” or “being an idiot,” when in reality I simply don't understand certain things right away. I've been mocked for asking too many questions, but my curiosity remains unshaken. Learning about the things that fascinate me is part of who I am, and no one will ever take that away from me.

My hope is that society grows more compassionate toward neurodivergent people, instead of making us feel ashamed for something beyond our control. I dream of a

future where everyone can embrace their authentic selves (within reason), where differences are respected, and where people strive to manage their own challenges with empathy. I envision a world free from discrimination—a world where no one is treated like an object, but rather as a human being deserving of dignity. That's the kind of world we want our children to inherit. And the first step toward that future is right here, right now: stand up for what you believe in, and refuse to become part of the problem.