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“Respect”

When people hear the word *respect*, they usually think of politeness. Such as saying “please” and “thank you.”. Sometimes it's holding the door open and always being kind to our elders. And yes, those things matter. But respect is much deeper than manners. It's the decision to see someone fully, to recognize their dignity, their struggles, their humanity, and to treat them as if they matter.

Respect is not passive, it's active. It shapes families, classrooms, governments, and even nations. It can heal divisions but also deepen them. It can build communities but also quietly tear them. Looking at the past, the present, and the future, one thing has always been clear; respect is not optional. It is the foundation of who we become. And for me personally, respect is not just an idea. It is a responsibility.

If we sincerely look at history, we see both the presence and the absence of respect shaping our communities. At the local level, respect has often meant survival. Communities were built by people who relied on one another. Neighbors shared food during hard winters. Families opened their homes during times of crisis. People stepped in when others were struggling. These acts were not dramatic, rather they showed something powerful; respect means recognizing that someone else's well-being is tied to your own.

But we also see the opposite. There were times when people were excluded from schools, neighborhoods, and opportunities because of their race, language, gender, and even beliefs.

Entire communities were treated as insignificant because they were not seen as “equal.”

Disrespect wasn't just hurtful, it became a system. It built barriers that lasted generations.

At the state and national level, respect has driven some of the most important changes in history. Civil rights movements, women's suffrage, disability rights, and equal education. All those efforts were all rooted in a simple demand; respect our humanity. Laws changed because people insisted that dignity should not be selective. Until respect expanded, societies progressed.

On the world level, the absence of respect has led to devastating wars, colonization and oppression. When nations saw others as inferior or disposable, conflict followed. But when countries chose diplomacy, cooperation, and mutual recognition, peace became a possibility. Respect has always been the dividing line between destruction and growth. History teaches us that respect is not automatic. It must be chosen. And when it is, it transforms communities.

Today, we are more connected than any generation before us. With one click, we can speak to someone across the world. We can access information instantly. We learn about cultures, ideas, and experiences different from our own. And yet, we are so deeply divided.

At the local level, respect shows up in everyday interactions. It shows up in the classroom where students feel safe to share their thoughts. It shows that teachers make the effort to understand a student's background instead of simply assuming. It shows up when communities create space for newcomers rather than pushing them aside.

But it also disappears quickly. It disappears in bullying, in stereotypes, in the quiet exclusion of someone who feels different. It vanishes when people are reduced to labels instead of being seen as human.

At the state and national level, respect is something constantly tested. Political debates have become more intense, and disagreement often turns into hostility. Social media has made it seem easier to speak without thinking. It is easier to attack than to listen. Easier to assume than to understand. Respect in the present means choosing to pause, even for a second. It means listening to perspectives that challenge us. It means recognizing that disagreement does not erase someone's humanity.

On the global stage, respect is essential for solving shared problems. Climate change, global health crisis, technological ethics, but none of these issues can be solved by one country alone. They require cooperation, shared research, and trust. Without respect, collaboration breaks down, but with respect innovation becomes possible.

The future will test our understanding of respect in ways we cannot fully predict. At the local level, the way we treat each other now will shape the adults we become. Children who grow feeling seen and valued are more likely to extend that same respect to others. Communities that practice inclusion will raise leaders who understand the importance of representation and fairness. If we fail to model respect, the next generation inherits division. If we succeed, they inherit unity.

At the state and national level, respect will guide decisions about education, healthcare, and technology. As someone planning to pursue STEM, I always think deeply about this. We are entering a world where artificial intelligence can make decisions, genetic engineering can alter biology, and technology can collect large amounts of data. These advancements are powerful, but without respect for ethics and human dignity, they can cause harm. The question is not what we *can* build, but what *we should* build. Respect will help answer that question.

On the global level, the future demands collaboration. Climate change will not pause for political differences. Diseases will not respect borders. Economic instability in one region can affect the entire world. Respect between nations, respect for cultures, resources, and sovereignty, will determine whether we compete destructively or cooperate constructively. Our generations will inherit these challenges. And respect will determine how we respond.

Respect is more than symbolic. It is personal. There have been moments in my life when I felt unseen. When I felt underestimated. When my background felt like something people noticed before they noticed my abilities. Those experiences could have made me bitter. Instead, they taught me awareness. They taught me how powerful it is to truly acknowledge someone. Because I know what it feels like to question whether you belong, I try to make sure others feel included. I pay attention to the quiet person in the group. I listen when someone is struggling instead of brushing it off. I try to be present. Not perfect, just present. Respect, to me, is presence.

As I pursue STEM, respect will shape the kind of healthcare professional I become. STEM is often seen as numbers, equations, and data. But behind every statistic is a person. Behind every innovation is a community that will be affected by it. If I design technology, I want it to serve people ethically. If I research a solution, I want them to be accessible. If I lead a team, I want every voice at the table to matter.

Respect will guide my leadership. It will remind me to collaborate rather than dominate. To listen before deciding. To consider the long-term impact of my work. Respect also affects how I see myself. For a long time, I felt pressure to prove that I was capable, that my identity was not a limitation. But I have learned that self-respect is just as important as respecting others. Believing that I deserve space in advanced classes, labs, and leadership positions is not

arrogance. It is understanding my own worth. When I respect myself, I step forward with confidence. When I respect others, I bring them forward with me. That is the kind of future I want to create.

Respect is not complicated. It is a daily decision. It is choosing to listen instead of interrupt. Choosing to understand instead of assume. Choosing dignity over ego. In the past, respect fueled movements that changed laws and expanded rights. In the present, respect holds communities together in a divided world. In the future, respect will determine whether progress benefits humanity or harms it. And in my life, respect is the standard I hold myself to.

Winning a state contest would be an honor. But more important than *any* award is the reminder that ideas matter. The respect, though simple, is powerful enough to shape generations. Communities are not strengthened by perfection. They are strengthened by people who choose, again, again, to treat each other as valuable. Respect is not something we give. It is something we build. And I intend to build it, locally, nationally, globally, and personally, for the rest of my life.