

WHAT ABOUT ME

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WALKING THE TIGHTROPE

AS A BLACK MAN IN AMERICA

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CHAPTER 1

EVERYONE DESERVES RESPECT

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ...Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

—JESUS, MATTHEW 25: 35-36, 40

Early in my career when I was a young engineer, I would stay at the office late trying to learn the new material and prepare for the next day's meetings. Usually there would be only a handful of people in the building, along with the evening cleaning crew. I remember an older black lady

would come around and empty the trash can in my cube, and I would often strike up a conversation with her. At the least, I made a point to ask how she was doing that day.

Over time, she told me about her family and how proud she was of her children and grandchildren. After our conversations, she would quickly move on to cleaning other cubes. She was conscious of not wasting time and always apologized for disturbing me. I always told her it was no problem and thanked her for taking care of my cube.

One quiet evening while in the office, I heard a colleague berating someone, so I got up to see what was happening. My colleague was tongue lashing the older black lady for some small detail related to the placement of her trash can. I couldn't believe how harshly she was speaking to this lady over something as insignificant as emptying a trash can. I walked over to her and said, *"How dare you talk to that lady in such a mean and distasteful manner? She is someone's mother and grandmother, working to make extra money to help her family. Given a change in circumstances, that could be your grandmother or my grandmother working nights to help one of us. Just because you see her as being beneath you does not give you the right to disrespect her."*

My colleague stormed off as she angrily told me to mind my own business. When I saw the cleaning lady the next

day, I apologized. She said, *“Baby, I’m used to that kind of thing. Don’t worry about it, and don’t get yourself into trouble over me.”* I never forgot the look of despair in her eyes. She needed the job and didn’t want to lose it because of the interaction with my co-worker.

For too many people, these kinds of experiences are normal. Disrespect is expected. To me, this is unacceptable. My parents always taught me to treat everyone right, especially those that society tends to look down on due to their station in life, lack of status or power, or inability to defend themselves. It is the least of them that we need to help the most. For me, respect is a core pillar to life. I start here because respect (and disrespect) affects us all.

In life, we will cross many paths and touch lives in unique ways. You never know who you will meet or where an unexpected interaction will take place. One of the cornerstones of my upbringing, which I still embody to this day, is to respect every person regardless of who they might be, what they look like, or their station in life. Every person deserves respect. Period.

Giving respect is far more than just “the right thing to do.” It is fundamental to our humanity. Through respect, we acknowledge a person’s basic dignity. It provides a universal connection between all of us. We all participate

in creating a better world when we listen to each other and show kindness, empathy, appreciation, and affirmation for one another. If we were to all commit to treating people with respect in our homes, at work, at school, in our churches, and in every aspect of our lives, the benefits to society would be astounding.

Sometimes we don't recognize that we reserve respect for only those in high positions, who have titles and entourages. We aim to get close to them and endear ourselves to them with the hopes of entering their orbit for some future favor or indirect benefit. We clamor to impress those with wealth and influence. This is human nature. We can be self-centered and disingenuous.

But I ask you: what about the people you see every day? The elderly lady or man that cleans the bathrooms and makes them spotless every day. Do you speak to him? What about the older woman who empties the trash and cleans the hallways every night? Do you say hello and smile, or do you walk past them like they are paint on the wall? What about the security guards you walk by every day, or the bus driver, the ticket agent, the new person in your office, the person of a different ethnic background? What about them? Do you ignore them or talk to them in a disrespectful manner? We can all fall into this, so it's important to remember how we feel when we are ignored or spoken to in a demeaning manner.

I am a firm believer that interactions in life are not by chance and the people we encounter are there for a reason. I challenge you to preserve your own dignity as you preserve the dignity of others—to be respectful, kind, considerate, and caring. Look out for others, and always stay humble.

THE WAY YOU TREAT PEOPLE

Growing up, I watched my maternal grandmother visit sick and homebound individuals who are often referred to as “the sick and shut-in.” She would prepare meals, and often did their laundry and even gave baths to those that were incapacitated. Family, friends, and church members made brief visits to these individuals on the weekends, so it was important to my grandmother that she visit during the week when visitors were fewer and when individuals were often at their loneliest. My grandmother wanted to fill the void or absence felt by the sick, in hopes of preventing loneliness and depression.

I remember going with my grandmother to visit an elderly lady who was always excited when my grandmother arrived. Her spirits were immediately lifted, but she would cry when my grandmother’s visits ended, and it was time to leave. This was the kind of impression my grandmother left. She stressed the importance of being kind to people, with or without an audience.

We should always show people genuine care and concern. This is simply the decent thing to do as human beings. It's not about how you treat people when the "lights and cameras" are on, but how you treat them when no one is around. So, how do you treat people?

- Do you scold the secretary?
- Do you scream at your employees?
- Do you ignore people or pretend you don't see them because you perceive them being beneath you—based on race, gender, or some other factor?
- Do you use microaggressions in a hurtful and insulting way?

Treating people right is not about shaking their hand, patting them on the back, and then speaking poorly of them as soon as they're gone. Be trustworthy. Be consistent. Treat people right no matter who is there.

How do you treat people right? It's actually quite simple. It's amazing how far a smile or kind word will go. You never know what kinds of adversities an individual may be facing. They could be going through financial or health problems. They might be feeling the simple pressures of life or even on the brink of ending their life. When you come into this person's path, your actions and words can create significant change. You can be the one that gives hope through a smile and pleasant exchange. You never

know which interactions are drawing people back from disaster or worse.

We all have a unique time and place in the universe, and I personally believe no interaction is a chance interaction. I believe all our interactions are woven together across the fabric of our lives, and they all have a purpose. Have you ever called a friend or run across an acquaintance and after you say something, they exclaim, *“I needed to hear that because I am going through something difficult in my life”*? We’ve all had these experiences. Your few words can help alleviate pressure that is creating anxiety in someone’s life. Maybe you’ve experienced being the one in need, when out of nowhere a kind stranger or person you barely pay attention to comes to your rescue just at the right time. These kinds of interactions reveal the connected symmetry across the universe of our existence. Your good deed or behavior causes a ripple across space and time. The ripple can return to you, or maybe it will return as a kind gesture to your child or close relative. So, remember that every interaction matters and that the true test of your character is not how you treat the famous, wealthy, powerful, and influential, but how you treat the least of the world’s citizens.

AS YOU PROGRESS

As we move forward, I will encourage you to seek lofty goals and pursue your objectives with vigor, but always

remember to come back to this core pillar of respect. Remain humble and willing to help someone along the way. Never forget that the way you treat people matters.

As I grew up, these statements were etched into my brain:

“Treat people right.”

“Always treat people with respect.”

“Be truthful.”

“Be humble, regardless of what you might achieve or level you might attain.”

“Give all praises to your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My faith in Christ was essential to my upbringing and remains a vital component and a driving force in my life today. There is no disconnecting my faith with my respect for individuals. You may or may not believe in a higher power, and I respect that. I do, however, encourage you to find your own motivation for respect. Search your soul and consider linking respect to something greater in your life. That way, you will have a reason to treat people right even when you don't feel like it.

Showing genuine respect has far-reaching consequences.

Remember Newton's second law? We are all impacting each other. I want to use the blessings I've received to help, enlighten, or simply encourage the life force of another individual, regardless of their race, creed, gender, religion, color, national origin, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. So, what kind of impact will you leave? I encourage you to start with respect. If you do, you can't go wrong because respect is ultimately about standing for a better world, in which all are truly equal, valued, and seen.