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Dr. Lacy

Advanced Composition

Respect

As a child, I grew up hearing my parents say things like, “respect your elders”, “when grandma is around, don’t speak to her unless spoken to”, and “always listen to older people”. Although most of this advice is not necessarily bad, it formed the way that I view others and myself to this day. Up until very recently, I believed that one’s age established their “legitimacy” as a human being. Because I believed this subconsciously for so long, I would always acquiesce to things that older people said and would always assume that what they said was true. It is not that I merely had a healthy respect for my elders, but rather an unfailing trust in what they said that I think was directly *unhealthy*. It was so specifically unhealthy because it gave me the false that, because I am not old, my opinions and thoughts do not matter.

This feeling did not just have impacts internally, but it would effect almost every area of my life. At work especially, I would constantly assume that whoever I was working with knew more than me, regardless of whether or not I had any reason to believe this or not. One day, though, I was assigned to work with Keith, the elderly owner of our company. I was supposed to work on a ladder with him inside of these three story towers. My coworkers were all giving me their condolences for having to work with this man. They explained that he was senile and did not listen. I laughed along with their stories but in the end shrugged them off, assuming they were simply giving him a hard time because of his age. I even had hope that he should be

listened to and if given the chance to share, may even have had some sage advice or guidance for me. When I got up into the tower, he set up a ladder incorrectly, shaking because of his age, and being indignant. Several times, I legitimately thought he was going to either fall, get seriously injured, or even die. He was a frail old man who was prideful, and instead of having more scope and humility due to his age, he had *less* due to his age. I could not just assume the best in him due to his age, but had to give him the dignity and honor of showing me how much of a child he could be.

My current belief is that, although the elderly have more life experience and always have a scope that is bigger than the one I can see due to their age, they are still like all other humans, biased and privy to their own perceptions. Therefore, we should listen to our grandparents, learn from their experience what we can, and be honoring toward them, but not view ourselves as any less because of our youth.

To explore this issue more, I would like to explore other culture's attitudes toward age and cross-compare these findings to weigh the positives and the negatives of each view. In an article entitled, "Teenagers Might Have a Problem With Respect But It's Not the One You Think", Dr. Diana Divecha for *Developmental Studies* explains that in order for young people to respect their elders, they first need to feel respected themselves. I do not think respect can work one-directionally either. I think when younger and older people have a healthy, mutual respect for one another, families and friends can thrive far more than when the onus is completely on the children to "respect their elders."

Another significant part of respecting elders, is purposefully not "babying" them. In other words, it is incredibly important to treat elderly individuals like adults as well. It bothers me

when I hear someone bending down and talking to an older person like they are a baby or toddler. Of course, this can be necessary at times if they are particularly lost or confused, but generally, I try to talk to old people like they are just that: Old people. In the same article, Divecha writes, “Self-determination theory asserts that people are more motivated when their underlying needs are taken into account. One of the most important human needs is autonomy, and autonomy is never more important than during the teenage years.” I would change this slightly by stating, “...and autonomy is never more important than the teenage, and the elderly years.” I think it is incredibly important for the elderly to be treated, not with a phony pseudo-respect, but with a very real, grounded respect molded by honor and care. Going back to the story about being in a tower with a random old man, the others at work were respecting him and treating him with more dignity by complaining about him than I was by handling him with white-gloves.

A very practical place where this comes into play, is with the decision of whether or not to put your parents into a nursing home or not. In the U.S. with the rise of Nursing Homes, this decision has been a much-debated one and a cause of much social anxiety in the United States. When one takes a look at other cultures around the world, they can see how rare this is in other nations. For example, in China, a whole family tree will remain in a home for generations and generations. According to an article by Jianfang Zhou and Norman Hearst, called, *Health-related quality of life of among elders the effect of widowhood* there is extensive data explaining that the quality of life is higher in older people who’s children are their caretakers, versus those who are alone or in a institution (3087).

In an article entitled, Study of American and Chinese Family Members' Evaluations on Institutionalized Care for Their Older Parents: Potential Development in the Future, Yushi (Boni) Li and Annie Buechel explore the case of China in terms of parental and elderly independence. This article was written in the *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration* in 2007, shortly after the abolition of China's One-Child Policy. They explain that the One-Child Policy has since made it very difficult for the younger generations to care for the older. They write, "Institutionalized care services have become a tool to eliminate the emotional and physical burden on home caregivers, especially adult children, who have a job" (180). In other words, these children that would have to care for both of their parents and in many cases four of their grandparents, are relieved of some of this by the creation of elderly intimations. *However*, this is challenging many of the preconceived notions about what respect for one's elders truly is. In fact, it challenged so many preconceived notions, that (going back to the prior article) China is moving back toward a tradition of caring for the elderly.

I find these articles important, and incorporate them only to show that an individual's culture's view of respect is not an objective standard, but rather the fluid changing of an ideal. In other words, the ideal is respect for one's elders, while the implementation is caring for the elderly as their children and grandchildren. I say this to point out that respect in the U.S. can look different than it does now, and we should not be shut down to such change. So going back to my experience. Although I recognize that there is no "right" answer to the question, "how do we treat the elderly", I do know that I do not have to treat them like gods, but rather people that are older and have experienced more. And while they have had time to get experience and wisdom, they have also had more time to solidify their biases and reiterate stereotypes. So as a grandson,

as an employee, and as a neighbor, I can respect those that came before me, while still validating myself as a man and someone who has thoughts worth sharing.

Works Cited

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