Respect Yourself

David Westwood - Lakewood, California

When I was young, my understanding of events and people was simple: things were good or bad. This made it easier for me to deal with the world around me. Then, when I became a young man, things seemed far more complicated, and instead of black and white I saw grays everywhere I looked. This made life dense with motive and decision, and more challenging to navigate. Now, as a man in middle age, and a new father, I find that my view of the world is reducing itself to the simple again.

I think this is because I’m trying to be a good parent and teach my daughter what she needs to know about life. I naturally break complex things down into small pieces so I can explain them. And far from oversimplifying, I find this brings me back to the handful of important basics of being alive.

One of those basics is respect: respect for yourself, and respect for others. Whether it’s spelling, cartwheels, piano, I teach my daughter to try. To fail feels bad, certainly, but not to have tried feels worse, because you can’t respect yourself for it. And as the saying goes, if you don’t respect yourself, no one else is going to do it for you.

I remember once—I must have been seven or eight—I was playing at my cousin’s house with his toys. His family was better off than mine, and he had many more toys than I did. There was one in particular that I’d always wanted, and I slipped it into my pocket when he wasn’t looking.

I dimly sensed, even at that age, that I would never be able to enjoy playing with the toy, nor would I ever again be able to look my cousin in the eye. I would always know I had stolen, and my opinion of myself would suffer.

His mother drove me home later, and when she dropped me off I shamefacedly pulled out the toy and gave it back. She knew, I’m sure, what had happened, but she thanked me and never spoke of it again.

I hope to help my daughter avoid similar mistakes, because I know she first has to gain self-respect before she can start truly respecting others. Then she’ll be able to see and accept in them the strengths and weaknesses she already sees and accepts in herself. This, I think, is a bonding mechanism almost as powerful as love.

So I believe in respect. Because without respect there’s no caring; and without caring, life is a harsh wasteland. Without respect we’re all enemies, with just the occasional bridge to a friend.

I’m not perfect in this regard, far from it. But I try my best, and I respect others for trying their best in this changing world. I respect people for trying, in whatever way they can, to live according to some internal standard—to raise their children to hope, to try, and to respect.

As heard on *the This I Believe podcast*, March 9, 2015
<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/1949/>