**Learning Together: People matter (2)**

In the list of our guiding principles that we together determined at the Poatina weekend, ‘people matter’ was the third most important, ‘respect’ the (equal) fifth and ‘accepting people’ and ‘being non-judgemental’ the (equal) twelfth. It seemed to us on the committee that these three guiding principles that are important to us as a community could and probably should be looked at together.

In the first discussion guide on these three principles, Ali suggested that acceptance, or more precisely thinking the best of someone, is a useful antidote to the devaluation of people (that is, the belief in practice that people don’t matter) This attitude, she suggested, is rampant in Australian, modern and/or Western culture. In this second discussion guide, I want to take a closer look at respect, which I think, when practiced, is a living demonstration and experience of the belief that people do matter.

There seems to be two clusters of meaning to the word ‘respect’:

1. A feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements… (synonyms for this idea might be admiration and appreciation)
2. Due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others... (synonyms for this idea might be consideration or regard)[[1]](#endnote-1)

The word respect comes from the Latin “to look (back) at; to regard (in the sense of protect); to consider (i.e. to examine, look at attentively)”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The latter definition seems to me to be the general or baseline definition of a way of relating to others in general; the former, more akin to admiration, seems to come into play with regard to those who are seen to have excelled in some aspect of life.

However, I think there’s a connection between the two clusters of meaning. The first connection may be simply that if we really look attentively at others we can find something in them to admire. In the first discussion guide Ali wrote about coming to appreciate or at least to accept her housemate’s behaviour when she discovered and understood something of the struggles she had encountered in her life and was still encountering.

Perhaps the second connection could be named ‘Hospitality’; our giving a friendly and welcoming space in our personal lives and our social settings for those who, or for that which, is strange or different. We explored this idea in the second *Learning Together* discussion prepared by Cheryl.

I’m not sure what to call a third connection between the two definitions; perhaps it’s a sense of human solidarity. I think it was what the 16th century poet John Donne was writing about when he penned the words *No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main*” (and I think he was referring to people, not just males!). Donne goes on to write that because of this human inter-connection (the fact that we are profoundly social beings) the death of any person diminishes him also. So in a real sense my regard for the other and the regard for myself are intertwined.

St Paul uses the imagery of a human body, rather than a continent. He writes:

*If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it…the eye cannot say to the hand ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet ‘I have no need of you’. On the contrary, the members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

(You might like to note as you read that less respectable in this context probably means *less worthy of an attentive look* and that the Hebrew word behind the word honour means *to give weight to*).

**But what does respect look like?**

A quick survey of sites about respect on the Web reveals that the single most suggested behavioural characteristic of respect is **listening.[[4]](#endnote-4)** For most of us that rings pretty true; when someone actively listens to us and we feel heard we feel more worthwhile and valued. All of us, no matter how good a listener we are, can improve our ability to listen. There are lots of resources on the internet to help us improve our listening skills[[5]](#endnote-5), but that’s just one aspect of listening. If we really want to listen to someone, that intention will eventually come through in our behaviour. Without a real desire to listen, no amount of technique will make us for our half-heartedness.

A second characteristic of respect seems to be **encouragement and esteem** **(or appreciation).** To encourage someone is to put heart into them, or to strengthen their capacity to act. Most of us know how disheartening discouragement is; you want to give up and you can’t be bothered anymore. When someone lets me know that they appreciate me or something I’ve done I expand inside and somehow have more energy or desire to keep on going. Mind you, if I discern that the encouragement is insincere the effect is the opposite! Sometimes I find it hard to think well of others; when that happens I try to look behind behaviour that annoys me and to seek to understand where that behaviour comes from. In order to do that, I discover that I need to listen, sometimes beyond and behind the words or actions.

A third characteristic of respect, from my perspective, seems to be **speaking to a person rather than about them.**  Sometimes, particularly when there may be a difference of opinion about something, it’s difficult to talk to people, because we feel we won’t be understood or the differences between us seem too big to be resolved. But along with insincerity, there’s nothing quite as disheartening or discouraging as people talking about you behind your back. In my experience, it’s a really community killer! I’ve often found it helpful to preface a conversation I’m dreading with an admission that I feel a bit anxious about the conversation I want to have. If I acknowledge that it’s my feeling to deal with, it’s amazing how often the person I’m talking with will make an extra effort to listen to me and the things I’m want to say. And the relationship is almost always strengthened by this sensitive, two-way honesty.

There are others practices like **keeping confidences** and **requesting permission before you enter someone’s space or use someone’s time or possessions** that are helpful ways of showing respect. No doubt you may be able to suggest some others, particularly as you reflect on what behaviours from others help you feel respected.

1. (https://www.google.com.au/search?q=respect&rlz=1C1GGRV\_en&oq=respect&aqs=chrome.0.69i59j69i60j69i59j35i39j69i60l2.5155j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Shorter OED [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26ff [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. [https://www.bastiansolutions.com/blog/index.php/2011/04/06/5-easy-ways-to-show-people-respect-and gratitude/](https://www.bastiansolutions.com/blog/index.php/2011/04/06/5-easy-ways-to-show-people-respect-and%20gratitude/);<https://kidshelpline.com.au/young-adults/issues/respect-relationships> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. E.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6-MIeRr1e8>; http://[www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm)?

   **Questions for discussion:**

   1. Which of the three connections between the two meanings of respect add to your understanding of respect? I what ways does it do that?
   2. Which of the five examples of respectful behaviour do you find the most challenging to put into practice? Do you know why?
   3. What other behaviours, from your experience, do you think contribute to respect?
   4. What verses of Scripture (or quotes from other sources of wisdom) do you think might help us to understand and practice respect?
   5. In what ways do you want to change or consolidate your behavioural patterns in order to better show respect? Or what new behaviour do you want to adopt?

   Bruce Dutton, August 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)