**In Search of … Respect**



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I have been accused of conflict avoidance. The accusers suggest that it is driven by cowardice, whereas self-delusion leads me to believe I’m driven by a more noble cause; processes in conflict resolution. I do have a belief that humanity can progress toward a more heaven on earth type condition, if we can only get an understanding of what constitutes a respectful interpersonal transaction.

My exploration of respect started in the nineties. After a particular service at our church, I approached Fr. Joe and commented on that day’s reading, [1 Corinthians 13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013&version=NIV), stating I really liked the reading but couldn’t understand why it became the standard for weddings. It seemed that “Love” is used repeatedly, stirring an emotional response in those gathered for the occasion. If we did a global search and replace of “love” with “respect” in the passage, we would have a much better understanding of Paul’s intent. In fact, if you performed the edit against the whole bible, sayings like “Respect thy Neighbour” may point us in a different direction. Fr. Joe’s comment was, “*you’ve obviously meditated on this a lot more than I have!*”. I hadn’t at the time.

That was the launch point for trying to understand the meaning of this very common word. We all use it, but does it mean the same thing to all of us? Can we codify respectful transactions? Given humanity has made several attempts, from Mosiac Law and Hammurabi’s codes to current Justinian codes and common law, defining respectful actions still seem elusive.

A second driver for the exploration was the reading of Machiavelli’s Prince. Machiavelli was just observing history to advise the Prince on why it is better to be feared than loved. The prior statement is too simplistic to represent The Prince, but it serves the current purpose. It seems that humanity has followed this Machiavellian paradigm since agrarian societies first arose. Today, the appeal is not restricted to international relations, but applies just as much to domestic politics and the business world. I have recollections of Sun Tzu’s “Art of War” being on the required reading list for young executives. “Winning is everything” seems to be the driving mantra, though it is usually couched in socially acceptable terms such as Win-Win and Risk Sharing.

The third leg of the stool is our programming. Without belabouring Mind-Body and theistic debates, I would assert that we all have electro-chemical reactions to all transactions since birth or maybe even in utero. Physical transactions like touching a stovetop is an instant bug-fix, whereas social transactions have more subtle and cumulative adjustments. The sum total of all of these transactions represent our programming and therefore our actions any point in time. I would further assert that if we learn HOW to have “respectful” social transactions, our programming would have more positive outcomes and this would have the *“…arc of history bending toward justice…*”.

The three legs of this stool seem disparate enough to make the seat uncomfortable! To get to this utopia, we need to change the standard narrative as documented by Machiavelli. The potential “reprogramming” through respectful transactions seems alluring but determining a “respectful social transaction” is the centre of the dilemma. We all think we possess a clear understanding of respect but our actions point in another direction. My quest therefore is to solicit approaches to defining positive social transactions. One can see right away that it spans all aspects of society and needs to be looked at in the context of education, healthcare delivery, and even debates in the House of Commons. The “Rule of Law” though is a cornerstone as it represents our current “best attempt” at respectful transactions but contains many fatal flaws.

The topic is broad and perhaps, boundless. Maybe we can start with what constitutes a respectful interaction that reduces conflict. In a world that glorifies winning, this is a tall order. When we see the role of ego in our daily interactions, it makes the task even more daunting. When we look at respect in different cultural settings, a misread of a cultural norm escalates rapidly. We must study it in a variety of domains before we even start to generalize the practice of respect.

How do we replace the Machiavellian paradigm with a new standard narrative based on respectful interactions? The study of respect is important for humanity’s progress. I lack the ability and the mental faculties to research this line of inquiry. ***A think tank solely dedicated to respectful interactions*?** I would support any venture that is willing to take up the torch.