

# *Respecting Our Elders*

A Sermon Delivered on September 16, 2018  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Respect your elders,  
but don’t ever accept power used wrongly.”*

*-- Najwa Zebian*

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**First Reading:** by the Lebanese-Canadian author and educator Najwa Zebian. Zebian's passion for language was evident from a young age, as she delved into Arabic poetry and novels. When she arrived in Canada at the age of sixteen, she felt unstable and adrift in an unfamiliar place. Nevertheless, she went on to become a teacher as well as a doctoral candidate in educational leadership. Her first students, a group of young refugees, led her back to her original passion: writing. She began to heal her sixteen-year-old self by writing to heal her students.

This is a short piece entitled: "Age and Wisdom"

Respect your elders, but don't ever accept power used wrongly.

Just because they're older, it doesn't mean they're wiser.

Just because they're in power, it doesn't mean they're just.

Just because they're accountable for their actions, that doesn't mean they realize the importance of honesty.

If you don't stand your ground, they will walk all over you and even make up lies about you if they have to keep their statuses safe.

Walk with your head up high and don't look down except to remind yourself of where we all came from and where we all will end up.

**Second Reading:** by Ram Dass, who was known as Richard Alpert, a Jewish Harvard professor of clinical psychology, before traveling to India to study with the guru Neem Karoli Baba in the late 60s, and becoming a renowned spiritual teacher himself. This is from his book: "Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying."

If we listen to the rhetoric of the economists, politicians, social planners, advertisers, statisticians, and health-care providers, the overwhelming message we're sent is that aging is a great social ill, a necessary evil, a drain on society, and an affront to esthetics. When avoidance finally fails, old age should be coped with as one would cope with a chronic condition – leprosy, say, or an unwanted visitor who unpacks his bags and won't go away...

This is a distorted view, of course, and not only a great disservice to the old but also one that inevitably returns to haunt the young. A Chinese story I love points this out beautifully. It tells of an old man who's too weak to work in the garden or help with household chores. He just sits on the porch, gazing out across the fields, while his son tills the soil and pulls up the weeds. One day, the son looks up at the old man and thinks, "What good is he now that he's so old? All he does is eat up the food! I have a wife and children to think about. It's time for him to be done with life!" So he makes a large wooden box, places it on a wheelbarrow, rolls it up to the porch, and says to the old man, "Father, get in." The father lies down in the box and the son puts the cover on, then wheels it toward a cliff. At the edge of the cliff, the son hears a knock from inside the box. "Yes, father?" the son asks. The father replies, "Why don't you just throw me off the cliff and save the box? Your children are going to need it one day."

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An “elder” – my dictionary tells me - is “someone of advanced age.” As I look at the people in this room, I see a fair amount of white hair. And among some, I detect an absence of hair altogether. What do you think – do you consider yourself an elder?

Some of us are parents. Some of us are grandparents. Some of us are great grandparents. But whether or not we are any kind of parent, we all know people who are younger than us. We are their elders. That means they should respect us.

What do you think – do you get the respect you deserve?

\* \* \*

This reminds me of a story, a true story: Once upon a time, before Elaine and I moved to California, we lived in Illinois. Back in Illinois for several years Elaine was Executive Director of a non-profit called Generations of Hope. Generations of Hope is an intentional, multigenerational neighborhood designed to support families with adopted foster children and to provide a community for seniors.

The program provided housing for a dozen families with a total of 30 children, and about 60 seniors. The neighborhood was located on a former military base, making good use of a cluster of homes that had once housed military families. The seniors received very affordable retirement housing and were expected to engage in a variety of community activities with the youngsters– whether mentoring, tutoring, gardening or games – serving as surrogate grandparents.

Generations of Hope is based on the belief that in such an intergenerational neighborhood the gifts of all residents contribute to the well-being of people of all ages. In this “intentional neighboring” young and old residents who are vulnerable are viewed as friends, neighbors, and family - as caring and contributing community members.

What Elaine discovered during her years at Generations of Hope, is that any close community has its challenges.

With great regularity, she heard seniors complain about the youngsters, that they were too restless and too rowdy or didn’t follow the rules. The seniors’ complaints could be boiled down to one simple statement: the children didn’t respect them.

The seniors weren’t the only ones to sometimes complain. The children had their share of grievances, too. In some ways they were very different. It wasn’t that the seniors were too restless or rowdy, just the opposite. They were too rigid and too set in their ways. They

failed to understand the needs and wishes of the children. The children's complaints could be boiled down to one simple statement: the seniors didn't respect them.

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It is difficult to extend respect to others, when we ourselves are not respected. And we are right to expect a degree of respect, no matter our age, no matter who we are.

These past few weeks, since the death of Aretha Franklin, a month ago today, it has been hard to think about respect, without the sound of her voice echoing in my mind – that great song of hers: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T Find out what it means to me. R-E-S-P-E-C-T Take care TCB...” (TCB means “taking care of business...”)

She recorded that song on Valentine's Day of 1967. It shot to No. 1 on the charts, and won her first two Grammy Awards. It also made her an international star. But she didn't write the song. She re-wrote and re-arranged a song by Otis Redding, which he had recorded two years earlier.

For Otis Redding it was the song of a man who comes home after a hard day's work, and wants his wife to treat him with respect. Redding's version is a plea from a desperate man who will give his woman anything she wants, even if she has done him wrong, as long as he gets some respect when he brings home money.

Aretha Franklin changed a few words, and the mood of the song. She made the song a declaration from a strong, confident woman. She knows she has everything her man wants, she never does him wrong, and she demands respect.

As music critics put it, Aretha transformed the original meaning “not so much by changing the lyrics, as by the feeling that she imparted on the song...” (Peter Guralnick) For her, “it was never just about how a woman wanted to be greeted by a partner coming home from work. It was a demand for equality and freedom and a harbinger of feminism, carried by a voice that would accept nothing less.” (Jon Pareles) In the summer of 1967, “there was something about this black woman's asserting herself that seemed like a call to national arms.” (Wesley Morris) Her version of the song resonated beyond individual relationships to the civil rights, counterculture and [women's liberation] movements. “It was the need of the nation,” Aretha Franklin later wrote, “the need of the average man and woman in the street, the businessman, the mother, the fireman, the teacher — everyone wanted respect.”

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Denying civil rights, denying women's rights, denying immigrants' rights, denying human rights are all forms of disrespect.

Najwa Zebian says we should respect our elders, but we should also expect our elders to respect us. She says, if our elders misuse their power, if they act foolishly, or unfairly, or

deceitfully - we must stand our ground. We must stand our ground, or they will walk all over us.

Najwa Zebian has experienced her share of disrespect, as a woman who has been subject to men using their power wrongly, and as an immigrant, whose insecurity in a foreign land made her an easy target for bullies, young and old. Through her writing, she has been able to give voice to her experience, and her longing for respect, a longing that is shared by many others who are part of the #MeToo movement, but certainly not limited to it. It is rather one expression of a universal human longing for respect.

In a piece entitled “Think of Me Too,” she writes:

“If you want me to listen to you, respect that I can hear. If you want me to speak to you, respect that I have a voice. If you want me to look at you, respect my ability to see. Do you know how to do that? Listen to me, when I talk, talk to me when you hear me, and look at me when I look at you.... Open your heart to me if you respect that I am worthy of your love.”

And she writes of love:

“Unconditional love is not true love. It’s foolish love. True love... has conditions of respect. Don’t tell me disrespect can come out of love. Don’t tell me violence can come out of love. Don’t tell me manipulation can come out of love. True love is not blind. It has a vision.”

\* \* \*

Moses had a vision on Mount Sinai. Moses had a vision of God, and God’s law. Of the Ten Commandments God wrote on two stone tablets, and handed to Moses, the first moral commandment listed – before the commandments not to lie, not to steal, and not to kill – the first commandment addressing how we should treat each other, says we should honor our father and mother.

This is not a coincidence. It is an expression of how crucial it is, that we respect others, beginning with our elders.

Reflecting on the moral messages of these ancient Jewish teachings, Rabbi Michael Lerner questions the term “commandment,” because the word sounds oppressive and hierarchical. He prefers to think of them as Ten Commitments we are called to make, in order to live responsibly with one another. He encourages observant Jews to start each day with ten minutes of meditation on these ten principles.

Thinking of how he might respect his elders, he strives every day to make this commitment:

“Aware of the suffering caused by aging, disease, and death, I vow to provide care and support for my parents. Aware that every parent has faults and has inflicted pain on their children, I vow to forgive my parents and to allow myself to see them as human beings with the same kinds of limitations as every other human being on

the planet. And I vow to remember the moments of kindness and nurturance, and to let them play a larger role in my memory as I develop a sense of compassion for them and for myself.”

\* \* \*

Our elders deserve respect. But they don't deserve respect because they were perfect parents, or because they were always fair, always loving, and always wise. Our elders deserve respect, because they were imperfect people who lived in an imperfect world, and did the best they could.

When we are young, looking up to our elders, it is easy for us to see their shortcomings. When we are young, our elders seem so strong. We depend on them. We desperately need their love and wisdom. And so, of course, we are acutely aware how they invariably fall short of our childhood hopes and dreams. We are acutely aware of every instance they are impatient and angry with us, every time we see them make mistakes.

The older we become, and they older they become, the more glaring their limitations seem: like the man who sees his father as nothing but a burden, because the old man is too weak to work. The young man embodies the values of a society that sees aging as a social ill, a drain on society, a chronic and ultimately terminal condition. From this point of view, the reasonable thing to do would be to put this human burden in a box, and pitch it off a cliff.

Ram Dass writes,

“The images our culture generates are designed to make you feel that aging is a kind of failure; that somehow God made a big mistake. If God were as smart as the commercials, people would be young forever, but since God isn't, only the wonders of science and commerce can save us. Can you see how bizarre this assumption is, and how much pain it creates?”

From the moment we are born, we grow older. Our aging is not an accident. It is the most essential aspect of being alive.

We are all elders. We all deserve respect. Not because we have accomplished great things, but because we try and fail, and we try again. We deserve respect, not because we have acquired all wisdom and knowledge, but because we are still willing to learn.

We each are endowed with a vision of a better world. We have caught glimpses of this world in acts of true love we have known. And the condition of true love is respect.

From the day of our birth we have asked for love and respect.

With every day we grow older,  
let us deepen our commitment to respect all people,  
and build the world of which our grandparents dreamed.  
So be it. Amen.