

Bridging the Gap

by Mark Jones



simple ¢ents

A young man from the first grade stood up, bowed, and prepared to give his best shot at answering the question posed by Black Belt Sensei, author, and speaker Jim

Bouchard. The answer to a question many adults seem to struggle with, or at least an answer that we often fail to employ in our lives on a day to day basis.

Jim asked the question and prepared to lead the classroom to the answer as most 6 and 7 year olds haven't mastered such concepts and life skills, at least not in a manner to articulately express them.

As I listened to Jim reveal the little boy's reply, one that belied the boy's young age, it caused me to reflect on a story shared by Stephen Covey in Every Day Greatness. In his book he shared a story of Mary Fisher's struggle to answer the same question:

In 1992, like many people in Los Angeles, I watched TV news reports of Rodney King speaking to the press after four officers accused of beating him in 1991 were acquitted, leading to riots in the city. As King spoke to the reporters, he plaintively asked, "Can we all get along?"

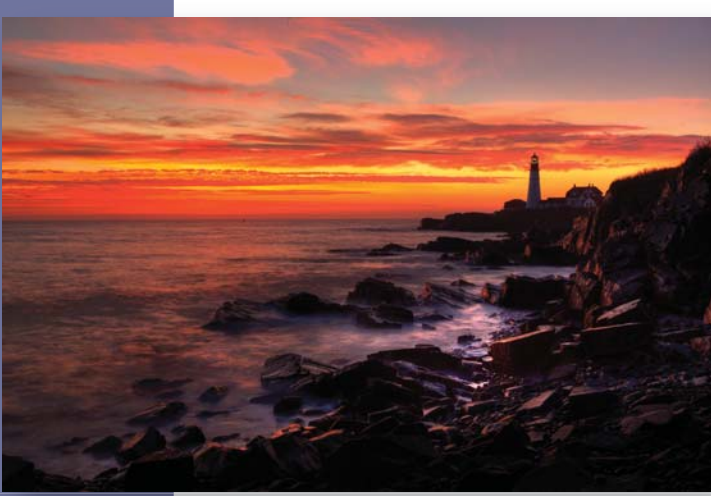
"No! We can't," I shouted back at the TV, though no one else was in the room to hear me. Mine was not an idle, uninformed response. I knew what I was talking about. In late 1989, I had bought a house in an affordable eastside neighborhood of Los Angeles called Highland Park, which was being transformed by waves of new immigrants, and I was convinced that racial harmony was impossible. Statistics said that each year, tens of thousands of new immigrants, mostly from Latin America and Asia, were pouring into Southern California, yet for most whites, these trends remained in the abstract realm of statistics.

When I moved to Highland Park, however, the statistics became my daily reality and brought my prejudices to the surface. Many of my neighbors were from Mexico, El Salvador, the Philippines and Vietnam, and for the first time, I was in the minority and didn't like it.

Convinced that we had nothing in common, I fortified myself in my lovely pink Spanish house on the hill. I rarely spoke to my neighbors, waving occasionally when we took out our trash cans or passed by in our cars. I fit their stereotype – the unfriendly white "gringa" who owned the nicest house on the block – just as they fit my preconceived notions of immigrants who stubbornly refused to assimilate.

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I was annoyed when Hispanic salespeople in Radio Shack didn't understand when I asked for lithium batteries or extension cords. It irritated me that the local supermarkets didn't carry things like blue cheese or soy milk, and that some billboard ads were written in Spanish.

For years, I complained to various officials when my neighbors behaved in ways I didn't agree with. One woman from El Salvador kept a rooster in her backyard that woke me up at five every morning. When I reported her to the Animal Regulation Department, she responded to the complaint by cutting off the bird's head. I felt guilty about being the impetus for the rooster's brutal demise, but rationalized it as being necessary to restore peace and quiet to the neighborhood.

When my neighbors from Mexico played their music too loud, I called the police, who put a stop to it. Surmising that I had reported them, my neighbors stopped speaking to me. It was a punishment I could live with, since I reasoned that I was bringing the neighborhood into compliance with my values.

Then, two years ago, something happened that changed me and how I live in my neighborhood. In a matter of two days, I lost the things that mattered most

to me. My six-figure job as a senior writer for a national magazine came to an end, and a relationship with a man I loved ended badly. Suddenly, all my anchors were gone and, sunk deep in grief, I wondered how – or if – I would pull myself out.

The losses I experienced humbled me and made me vulnerable, but as a consequence I began to connect more fully with my neighbors and the world around me. I discovered how extraordinary they were. They were nothing like my biases had made them out to be. They were hard-working, honorable people who like me were just looking to live well and experience some measure of happiness.

I learned that the woman from El Salvador had fled her country with two young daughters after death squads murdered her husband. She cleaned houses to make ends meet and send her daughters to college. I learned, as well, the touching stories of those from Mexico, Guatemala and other native lands.

“Respect is what we owe; love, what we give”

– Philip James Bailey

Now, many of my neighbors are my friends. During the holidays we exchange gifts, and when things go wrong we take care of each other. Today, I would answer Rodney King's question differently. I'd say that it is possible for us to get along if people from different cultures don't make the same mistake I did. I once viewed my neighbors as individuals and I saw them as different and apart from me. I see now how their lives and mine include experiences universal to us all: loss, disappointments, hope, and love. It all starts with respect.

Jim Bouchard posed his question to the first grade class, “Who can give me the definition of respect?” While most adults may reel off some common dictionary type definition such as, “the feeling or attitude of admiration and deference toward somebody or something,” this

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little boy offered a definition that left Jim speechless. He rose to his feet and gave Jim the respectful martial arts bow and said, "Sensei, respect means taking care of one another!"

Can there possibly be better definition of respect? If we would seek to take care of each other in our business relationships and looked to do what was best for the customer instead of what was best for the bottom line, if we would take care of our environment for the benefit of each other, if we would look for ways to take care of those around us in our communities and our neighborhoods without regard for what we might be received, not only would the lives of others benefit but we would find that our own lives would expand dramatically as well.



*"Respect is love in plain clothes."
– Frankie Byrne*

Special thanks to Jim Bouchard for displaying this definition of respect with his caring gift to the seniors of Old Orchard High School where he opened our leadership and financial management seminar by sharing his story and principles on leadership.

Information on his book, Think Like a Black Belt as well as his contact information for speaking assignments can be found at www.jimbouchard.org.

Jim Bouchard
Speaker-Author-Media Expert

Times are tough...
...it's time to get tougher!

"...a much needed roundhouse kick to laziness & complacency." ~ Spencer Hughes, FOX Across America

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