

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T”
A Mother’s Day Meditation
Proverbs 31:10-12, 25-31
Sunday, May 10, 2009
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Back in 1967, Aretha Franklin, the well-known rhythm and blues singer, released a song that would become her “signature song.” It is, of course, “Respect” which was originally written by Otis Redding in 1965. When Redding first sang the song which was the most famous he ever wrote, the words described a man’s plea for respect and recognition from a woman. But when Aretha Franklin recorded it, the roles were reversed and the singer asks for respect and dignity from the man she loves. It became an anthem for the feminist movement. In addition to winning two Grammy Awards for Aretha in 1968, Rolling Stone magazine has rated it as #5 on their list of “the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.”¹

Why has this song become so popular over the years? Well, certainly because of Aretha’s singing and that huge voice of hers. And if you were paying attention to pop culture at all in 1967, you learned to sing the word “respect” as she sang it – “R-E-S-P-E-C-T”!

But I would suggest that the song is so popular because it struck a chord. If it is remembered as a song where women have to “spell out” what they expect to receive from men, it also voices a recognition in all of us men of the importance of honoring and being thankful for the important women in our lives.

This call for respect is certainly not new and many famous poets have written of the kind of respect women should receive. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the famous nineteenth century poet, wrote, “Every man, for the sake of the great blessed Mother in Heaven, and for the love of his own little mother on earth, should handle all womankind gently, and hold them in all Honor.”²

But even Tennyson’s words were not new. The Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is traditionally attributed to King Solomon and dates to the

¹ “The RS 500 Greatest Songs of All Time,” <http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/500songs>.

² Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In All Honor” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

middle of the tenth century B.C. – almost three thousand years ago. The well-known passage we have heard read this morning certainly extols the value of In the Book of Proverbs, the author asks the question, “A capable wife who can find?” – and provides the answer: “She is far more precious than jewels.” Then the author extols her qualities – the trust she instills in others around her; she is an example of goodness; she wears strength and dignity like fine garments; she not only is capable of laughter but also speaks with great wisdom and kindness. Those who are truly appreciative among us might well repeat the words: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”

The truth, however, is that most of us (especially those of us men) still have a ways to go in offering these kinds of words of praise and R-E-S-P-E-C-T to the women in our lives. Wendell Berry, the esteemed southern writer who turns 75 this August, has written a poem entitled, “To My Mother.”³

I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,

³ Wendell Berry, “To My Mother” from *Entries* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994); quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Saturday, May 09, 2009, http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=750899&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005.

is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
and all is unentangled,
and all is undismayed.

This is the first Mother's Day I have ever experienced without having my own mother still alive. Since her death last October, I have often thought of the conversations we used to have, but, more importantly, the many more conversations we should have had. I've thought of the gestures I made to give her respect and honor, but I've also thought of the many opportunities I missed to share the feelings in my heart.

Benjamin Franklin said, "The best thing to give to your enemy is forgiveness; to an opponent, tolerance; to a friend, your heart; to your child, a good example; to a father, deference; to your mother, conduct that will make her proud of you; to yourself, respect; to all men, charity."

If this is the intent of this day, to give our mothers and the women in our lives conduct that will make them proud of us, then let's agree to work at it as fulfilling the fourth Commandment of honoring our parents. And if, like me, your mother is now on the other side, let us be no less diligent in sending these loved ones not only prayers asking for forgiveness, but also our heartfelt offerings of the deepest respect – all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with whom, we pray, they dwell.

Thanks be to God. Amen.