

From the Kitchen

23 November 2011



Cynicism is not my usual state of mind, but I'm finding it hard to resist its tendrils winding themselves around my neurons and threatening to take over. How can it be otherwise?

This cynicism has me want to say that we have lost a lot of decency in public life and in interpersonal transactions. Some of the concepts that have lost immediate recognition for too many people are manners, refinement, honesty, integrity, respect and truth. There has always been crassness in society, along with opportunism, rudeness, bigotry and bloody-mindedness. What seems different now is the balance between these. The latter seems to be in the ascendency.

There may not be anything inherently 'good' about one person holding open a door for another, but it at least demonstrates an awareness of the other. When extended to younger people doing so for older ones, it may even represent respect. Such respect for an older person – maybe even acknowledging them as an elder – demonstrates an awareness of a person's position in society: one's own and the other person's. It may well be that we have tried too hard (and succeeded) to have everyone feel that they are equal to everyone else and, in the process, we've lost something valuable. In between sameness and stratification, there is a dynamic state in which each individual has a sense of place in relation to everyone else. In this dynamic state, no-one is stuck in any particular position.

Relationship and relative position are two conditions that allow a society to exist harmoniously. We hear too much from educators and education administrators that the simple respect of teachers by students has disappeared from the classroom, making teaching and learning more difficult. The classroom is one place where acknowledgement of difference (between students and teacher) is useful and productive.

As with many situations where such acknowledgement is useful, it is not the case that the difference necessarily exists outside that particular situation. For instance, a year-twelve student may be an excellent tennis player and be a personal coach to one of her school teachers. A football umpire may be an employee of one of the players in an amateur team. The unequal relationship in each case is useful in the particular situation in which it exists.

In the wider community there is nothing inherently 'unequal' between a young person and an octogenarian. However, the younger person holding a door open for the older one is perhaps silently saying, 'I acknowledge that you have lived sixty years longer than I have and you have probably experienced many things I can only guess at, and I respect you for that.' In return, the younger person will likely have the respect of the older.

I used the word 'elder' earlier. We used to recognise the elders in our communities – people who had learning and wisdom that others could benefit from. It was not necessarily formal learning – often life experiences, adversities and 'aha' moments. Youngsters used to have more consistent contact with grandparents who were often more able than parents to instil a sense of balance into young people's lives. This contact also made youngsters more aware of the elements of the life cycle, including ageing and dying.

It seems to me that governments also used to take more note of elders in the community, especially in the guise of academics and scientists. Policies and parliamentary decisions were more informed than they are now by the 'wisdom' of people who were acknowledged experts in their fields. Such people are still appointed to committees and boards of enquiry, but their recommendations are often rejected or simply ignored. Expediency, short-sightedness and economic/financial/political self-interest seem to be the major reasons.

The important question is: how can we bring more of these useful qualities back into daily life? They cannot be mandated or legislated into existence. They need to come through leadership, most importantly leadership from politicians demonstrating respect for each other and for society's institutions. It is very damaging to the fabric of society when the prime minister attacks the judges of the High Court because she does not like their decision in a particular matter, or if the Minister for the Environment makes a personal attack on a scientist instead of engaging in a debate on the real issues.

Something that would help redress the situation is the establishment of more mentoring relationships between elders and young people. Youngsters crave such relationships because they crave guidance to help them make sense of what is to them a very confusing world. If a critical mass can be reached, we may again achieve a society in which harmony and goodwill are more common than is disruption and violence.