

We Can't Kill Them All

The recognition of the sanctity of the life of every man is the first and only basis of all morality.

- Leo Tolstoy

Christians call it The Golden Rule. Confucianism has a similar dictum. Virtually all religions have some version of The Golden Rule.

But Tolstoy's statement goes beyond those moral guides of religion. His statement includes respect for ourselves. As the ancient Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras (circa 580-500 BC) once wrote, "Above all things, reverence yourself."

Those who have little or no respect for themselves cannot have the ability and depth of character to offer respect to and for others. Respecting ourselves must be the place where we begin to teach children.

We must respect the children we teach and in turn teach them how to respect themselves. Sometimes, in our times of greatest need, the respect we have for ourselves and our loved ones is all that holds us together, separating us from those who resort to suicide, depression or insanity.

I would take this concept of respect a major step forward. We need to respect the multitude of other life forms on our planet and the non-biological part of it as well.

Respecting ourselves already has us respecting some other forms of life. Modern biological science estimates that we may harbour as many as nine times as many microbes on our skin and within our bodies as we have cells of our own body. In fact, we are already what the first Star Trek television series called symbionts. Not only do our bodies host other life forms, we depend on them to fight off still other microbes that would harm us with disease and other infections.

We are not individual life entities, islands in an ocean of other life forms. We are communities of life ourselves. Respecting our own health means providing support for the uncountable bacteria and viruses within us that help to maintain our health as they live their own lives.

We need to respect life forms beyond ourselves and beyond other humans. We have vegetarians and vegans disavowing the eating meat because the animal slaughter they believe is inhumane and unnecessary. Yet everything that every one of us eats--plant or animal--was at one time a living being with a life cycle and a desire to survive and reproduce just like ourselves.

We consume components of the mineral kingdom as if their sources will go on forever, which of course they won't. We build unrepairable appliances, for example, then throw them away when they no longer work, which is sooner rather than later because we build them as cheaply as possible. But minerals can't be destroyed any more than biological life can be destroyed. It collects in waste dumps waiting to be rediscovered as new sources of precious raw materials for manufacturing in the future.

Our waste dumps collect minerals in random willy-nilly fashion. Instead of separating our mineral waste so it can be recycled and remanufactured later, we cast it into huge piles where our descendents will have to pay heavily to dig it up and separate it. That includes separating off the poisons that have developed in the decomposing waste soup.

Biological life can't be destroyed? Of course any given entity of biological life can end its lifespan, but the now-dead cells become food for other life forms so that the food chain of life keeps revolving incessantly. Biological life never disappears, it only changes shape and position with respect to other life forms.

When we look after ourselves, we extend our own lives and the lives of many other microbes (in succeeding generations) within us. When we look after other forms of life outside of ourselves, we ensure that the food chain will continue unimpeded around the world. When we look after (respect) non-biological materials, we provide for the generations that will follow us.

As Tolstoy said, morality is all about respect. That respect begins with ourselves.

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