

Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

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Dignity

Chalice Lighting

Max de Pree: "We need to give each other the space to grow, to be ourselves, to exercise our diversity. We need to give each other space so that we may both give and receive such beautiful things as ideas, openness, dignity, joy, healing, and inclusion."

Check In

From dictionary.com

dignity (n). 1. bearing, conduct, or speech indicative of self-respect or appreciation of the formality or gravity of an occasion or situation. 2. nobility or elevation of character; worthiness: *dignity of sentiments*. 3. elevated rank, office, station, etc. 4. relative standing; rank. 5. a sign or token of respect: *an impertinent question unworthy of the dignity of an answer*. 6. Archaic. a. person of high rank or title. b. such persons collectively.

From etymology online:

dignity. c. 1200, "state of being worthy," from Old French *dignite* "dignity, privilege, honor," from Latin *dignitatem* (nominative *dignitas*) "worthiness," from *dignus* "worth (n.), worthy, proper, fitting," From c. 1300 as "an elevated office, civil or ecclesiastical," also "honorable place or elevated rank." From late 14c. as "gravity of countenance."

Dignity

Remy Debes¹

Historical Overview

In the opening sentence of its preamble, the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights affirms the “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” as the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (UN 1948). This claim would surprise our modern ancestors. Until about 1830–1850, neither the English term “dignity,” nor its Latin root *dignitas*, nor the French counterpart *dignité*, had any stable currency as meaning “the unearned status or worth of all persons”, let alone the grounds of universal rights or equality. Instead, in everything from Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) to Webster’s *Compendious Dictionary* (1806), “dignity” was primarily used with a conventional merit connotation—something like the “rank of elevation” that Johnson officially gave it.

How did this sea change in meaning come about? The UN Declaration makes clear that dignity’s moral-political meaning had become normalized by 1948. But what happened before 1948 that explains this transformation? These are not easy questions to answer. Although theorists often include historical remarks in their inquiries, they are just as often brief and subservient to some further, non-historical point. The result is a great many half-told stories about dignity’s past.

There are some notable exceptions. For some time, legal theorists have been etching out the details of dignity’s historical role in law and jurisprudence, especially in connection to rights. Second, theological inquiries into human dignity often engage an older history of ideas, especially the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola or scholastic debates about the biblical doctrine of *imago Dei*. Third, there is a considerable body of literature on the Enlightenment luminaire, Immanuel Kant, and his famous claim that humans do not have a “price,” only a distinctive and incomparable worth or *Würde*—usually translated as “dignity.”

Formulating Dignity

There is no single, incontestable meaning of dignity. In fact, there are so many possible meanings that it has become commonplace in the literature to worry about the expansive variety of conceptions, and in turn to worry whether dignity is or has become essentially ambiguous. And while its defenders find ways to mitigate or explain away this ambiguity, the concept of dignity has its share of detractors. Granting the *prima facie* force of the ambiguity worry, four broad categories of meaning stand out across context and history:

1. Dignity as *Gravitas*: a poise or grace associated with behavioral comportment; e.g., the sophisticated manners or elegant speech of nobility, or outward composure in the face of insult or duress.
2. Dignity as *Integrity*: the family of ideas associated with living up to personal or social standards of character and conduct, either in one’s own eyes or the eyes of others.

¹ Adapted from “Dignity,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

3. Dignity as *Status*: noble or elevated social position or rank.
4. Dignity as *Human dignity*: the unearned worth or status that all humans share equally (either inherent or constructed).

Dignity and Some Philosophers

Michael Rosen² largely blends categories (1) and (2) into a single strand of meaning, which he identifies as “dignity as behavior, character or bearing that is dignified.” Rosen then accepts (3) and (4) but adds his own further category, which he calls “dignity as treatment”: “To treat someone *with dignity* is... to respect their dignity.”

Aurel Kolnai³ argues that to be dignified is to comport oneself in a way that is not simply a reflection of authority, rank, moral uprightness, or a regimented or serious adherence to codes of conduct, but instead reflects something of “the beautiful.” As Kolnai puts it, our response to dignity is characterized, at least in part, by “our devoted and admiring appreciation for beauty.”

Meanwhile, George Kateb⁴ stresses the distinction between human dignity *qua* individual humans, and human dignity *qua* human species. Whereas the dignity of individuals can be described as a special kind of “status”—as in category (4) above—the dignity of the human species requires a further concept, namely, of “stature.” Per Kateb, the interdependence of humans is, “so extensive, so deep, and so entangled” that the human species is a unified entity or agency, and, as such, possesses dignity. This conclusion cuts against some positions that maintain dignity “proper” can only belong to individuals.

Suzy Killmister⁵ proposes three “strands” of dignity: personal, social, and status. To have personal dignity, Killmister argues, is to take oneself to be subject to personal “dignitarian” norms. And to have social dignity is to be subject to social “dignitarian” norms. What are dignitarian norms? Dignitarian norms are norms that either the person themselves, or society at large, take to be “ennobling” to uphold, or whose transgression the person or society consider to be “disgraceful or debasing.” Like Rosen, then, Killmister effectively blends categories (1) and (2), while at the same time drawing attention to a distinction between the personal and the social. We must also distinguish between *having* dignity and *recognizing* dignity (in others or in oneself). While personal and social dignity are *had*, status dignity is *recognized*. This recognition is a kind of respect. Status dignity, says Killmister, “does not call on others to esteem us, but rather to treat us in ways appropriate to the kind of thing we are.” And all humans deserve recognition respect in virtue of the “fact” of their membership in the category “human.”

²*Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

³“Dignity,” *Philosophy*, 1976: 251-271.

⁴*Human Dignity*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁵*Contours of Dignity*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

Six Reflections on Dignity from Donna Hicks⁶

1. Why Dignity Matters: The Important Role Dignity Plays in Our Lives and Relationships

When I tell people that I have written a book about dignity, the response is always the same: They pause for a moment and say “that is so important.” When I ask them to tell me why they think it's important, the most common response is that “we all want that feeling of self-worth.” While it is true, my experience is that in spite of its universal appeal, it's a topic that rarely gets discussed. We may not have words to describe it, but we all have an internal experience of it.

We know how great it is to be seen, heard, and acknowledged for who we are and treated as if we mattered. We also know what it feels like to be treated as inferior, discriminated against, ignored, misunderstood, criticized and excluded. There is little worse than being in a situation where you are treated unfairly and can do nothing about it, or being excluded from something that means a lot to you. We are all too well aware of the feelings that accompany these violations of our dignity. What is not common is to bring them up for discussion. It is often too embarrassing to admit that we have been treated so badly. It is why I decided to focus my attention on matters of dignity and to give us a language to bring these issues to the surface so that we can legitimize the suffering that accompanies these painful human experiences and do something about them. We don't have to just live with them. The dignity model has ways to address them.

Matters of dignity are at the heart of every interaction we have on a daily basis and the time has come for us to pay attention to them and to give them voice. They show up in the workplace, in schools, at home, in intimate relationships -- everywhere human beings come into contact with one another. Although most of my career has been spent working on repairing relationships at the international level -- between warring parties all over the world where dignity violations abound -- I have been spending a lot of time recently in the corporate world where there is also no shortage of indignity. One of the major issues I have uncovered in the workplace is that employees often feel that they are not treated well, but have no way to “speak-up” for fear of retribution. They tell me it would be career suicide to go to their bosses and tell them that they have violated their dignity. Thus there is a lot of resentment on the part of employees and little desire to extend themselves beyond what their job requires. It is infuriating to them that they are being mistreated and that there is no way to give voice to it. Conflicts over dignity reach the core of our humanity -- injuring that part of us that wants nothing more than to be valued and seen as significant.

⁶Donna Hicks, Ph.D., is the author of *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict* and an Associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

This is why I have focused my attention on matters of dignity: to shed light on something that we may not have either the courage or language to discuss. The shame that accompanies being treated badly prevents us from doing the very thing we need to do to recover from violations of our dignity: bring them out into the open, validate them, and give them the attention they deserve. When we have a physical injury, we seek help, but when we have a wound to our dignity, there is no 911 call, no emergency room. Bringing the issue to light can help us all heal from the many subtle and not so subtle ways that indignity has found its way into our lives. Everyday I remind myself that “we can do better and we can do it with dignity.”

2. We May Differ in Ideas but are United in Dignity: Dignity Crisis in American Politics

One of the founding principles of this country is that we are all created equal. I think this means we are all born equal in dignity. We are all born with the unalienable right to be free from oppression and to be treated as something of value. Yet our nation is a long way from living out this truth.

The extreme polarization that we are witnessing today in our political discourse is not based only on a difference of ideas about how government should function, or the best way to live together. There is something far more pernicious happening. Our behavior toward one another does not reflect the truth that we are all equal in dignity.

When we repeatedly justify treating one another in demeaning ways, whether it's on the campaign trail, in Congress, or in the media, the message we are sending is that it is acceptable to violate the dignity of others in pursuit of one's political agenda. What we are seeing today is the erosion of the very glue that holds a democracy together, in spite of our political differences.

What would it look like if the affairs of politics were conducted in a dignified way? How would our political leaders treat one another? After years of research, I have developed the Ten Essential Elements of Dignity:

1. **Acceptance of Identity.** Approach people as neither inferior nor superior to you; give others the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged; interact without prejudice or bias, accepting how race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. are at the core of their identities. Assume they have integrity.
2. **Recognition.** Validate others for their talents, hard work, thoughtfulness, and help; be generous with praise; give credit to others for their contributions, ideas and experience.
3. **Acknowledgment.** Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating and responding to their concerns and what they have been through.

4. **Inclusion.** Make others feel that they belong at all levels of relationship (family, community, organization, nation).
5. **Safety.** Put people at ease at two levels: physically, where they feel free of bodily harm; and psychologically, where they feel free of concern about being shamed or humiliated, that they feel free to speak without fear of retribution.
6. **Fairness.** Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way, according to agreed-upon laws and rules.
7. **Independence.** Empower people to act on their own behalf so that they feel in control of their lives and experience a sense of hope and possibility.
8. **Understanding.** Believe that what others think matters; give them the chance to explain their perspectives, express their points of view; actively listen in order to understand them.
9. **Benefit of the Doubt.** Treat people as trustworthy; start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.
10. **Accountability.** Take responsibility for your actions; if you have violated the dignity of another, apologize; make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors.

Going through the list, it doesn't take long to see the many ways that our political leaders, the media, and all the rest of us are violating each other's dignity. We are all born equal in dignity, and we must insist on acting like it.

3. Dignity Violator? Not Me! Facing the truth.

After explaining to a group of business officers why their employees were outraged by a policy decision the executive committee had made, one man objected strenuously. What I had said was that the employees most likely felt that their dignity had been violated -- that they were treated unfairly, felt betrayed, and were not recognized by the company -- all serious dignity violations. The man objected because he felt that the phrasing "dignity violations" was too strong and inappropriate. "We didn't violate their dignity, we just made a good business decision. It wasn't our intention to violate anyone."

I hear this type of response a lot. No one wants to be accused of violating dignity. It is a stark and bold interpretation of what happens when people feel emotionally injured. Because these injuries happen routinely and up to this point, have gone unnamed, hearing the word violation does get people's attention. And yes, it does elicit an unpleasant feeling when the mirror is held up to us; when we see for the first time, what other people have seen for a while. We all have blind spots. It's part of our shared humanity. We will feel some embarrassment, if not shock, when we learn how we have unintentionally harmed others by our actions. I remember how stunned I felt when some friends told me about how I had violated them. It's hard to take because we have an image of ourselves as good people with good intentions. How many times have you heard someone say, "but it certainly wasn't my intention to hurt you." As if that makes it all better. The fact remains, you still hurt the

person and he or she deserves an apology and your commitment not to do the hurtful behavior again.

We have instincts that protect us from exposing our mistakes. As the executive responded in the story above, we deflect and defend our actions instead of trying to learn more about the feedback we are given. This self-protective instinct keeps us from looking bad and more importantly, feeling bad. But it comes at a tremendous cost. What we end up doing is passing up an opportunity to grow and develop. Our need for inner stability overrides our need to change something hurtful about the way we treat others. And our relationships suffer because of it. No one wants to get close to someone or work for a company that violates dignity. If we could learn to overcome our instinct to deflect helpful feedback from others, the bonus at the end is that relationships improve. Adversarial connections turn into relationships that are strong and enduring.

At the end of the day, we need each other in order to succeed in this world, no matter whether it's in business or in our interpersonal relationships; might as well understand the truth about what works and what doesn't in maintaining healthy connections. If it takes the phrase, “dignity violator” to wake us up, then let's embrace it.

4. Diversity and Dignity

My friend, Maya McNamara, works with at-risk youth. Having been trained in the dignity model, she had an instant reaction to an event that took place among her students when fights broke out between different ethnic groups.

Her colleagues' reaction to the fights was that the students should go through diversity training. Maya felt differently. She had a hunch that the tensions between the groups had to do with dignity. She felt that what provoked the violence was that one or both groups felt “disrespected” by the other, that their dignity had been violated. She suggested to her colleagues that instead of doing diversity training that they allow her to conduct a dignity workshop.

Her goal was not only to help the students understand and respect “difference,” but to get them to see how they are also alike -- connected by a shared desire to be treated as if they were worthy. I started thinking about diversity and dignity.

Diversity awareness is crucial because it so effectively sheds light on the importance of understanding each other's unique identity and honoring what is special about each of us, no matter what group we belong to. It teaches us that no one group is superior to others and that we all could benefit from understanding each other's identity and culture. Recognizing others' unique qualities and identities highlights the differences between us, and honors them at the same time.

Dignity awareness not only highlights what is unique and special about different identity groups, but it offers the opportunity to look beyond those important differences and to connect us to something we all share. Our common desire for dignity—to be treated as something of value and worth -- is our highest common denominator. We all want it and we all deserve it.

Dignity also connects us to something equally true about our shared humanity: when we are treated badly, we all feel it. It inflicts an emotional wound that is hard to let go of. We are all vulnerable to being violated and we often react violently when that happens. We want to get even or to lash back. We all share the same reaction to having our dignity assaulted.

What dignity training can do is to close the circle of awareness of how we are all connected. Yes, we are unique, but we also share a primal desire to be treated as if we mattered. Recognition of our shared humanity -- both our value and vulnerability -- holds us responsible for how we treat one another. Acceptance of what ties us together goes beyond the Golden Rule. It's not just about how we want to be treated. It's about what we know to be true about the human condition.

5. Why It's So Hard to Be Decent Human Beings. It turns out that biology has a lot to do with our struggle.

How many times have you promised yourself that you were going to take the high road and not get upset with your co-worker who constantly provokes you; or that you would not respond defensively to your partner when she or he tries to give you help or vowed not to lie and cover up your mistakes when your bad behavior was exposed? How often have you wanted to “do the right thing” but found yourself unable to live up to it? What are those powerful Inner forces acting upon us, preventing us from being our best selves?

It's not easy being a decent human being. If only we knew a little more about what we are all up against as members of our species, struggling to maintain our dignity. It turns out that our biology has a lot to do with that struggle.

Self-preservation instincts. We all enter the world with self-preservation instincts encoded in our genes. When we feel a threat looming, the instincts get called up in seconds, motivating us to act in our own defense.

Some of these ingrained responses we have heard about, like our fight and flight instincts. But we have many more self-preservation instincts that we need to understand; many more behaviors that were originally designed to ensure our survival, but are getting us into trouble today in the 21st century. If we don't identify and understand these aspects of our shared humanity, we'll continue to allow our more primitive biology to rule our lives.

Just as we have instincts to protect us from physical danger (fight and flight), we also have instincts that protect us from psychological harm (what I call threats to our dignity).

How we violate our own dignity. Unfortunately, a lot of these instincts designed to protect our sense of worth, actually end up luring us into violating our own dignity.

For example, when someone delivers what feels like criticism to us, people usually react defensively and do not stay open to hearing what the person has to say. Our self-preservation instincts prevent us from taking in the information, often violating the dignity of the person trying to deliver it.

Looking bad in the eyes of others feels like death to these instincts. Defensiveness is called up to eliminate what feels like a threat to our sense of worth. This primitive reaction is overkill because there are times when we need to be told about our dysfunctional behaviors. We all have blind spots and others can easily see what we cannot see. We need to learn how to overcome these instincts and accept feedback from others.

Another common instinct is the impulse to save face. Look to what extremes Lance Armstrong went to in order to avoid looking bad in the eyes of others. He not only violated and deceived others to cover up his bad behaviors; it appears that for some time, he even deceived himself.

Winning the struggle. We need to name and understand these inner impulses that get called up when we perceive that our self-worth is on the line; when we feel our dignity is under threat. Paradoxically, our instinctive attempt to look good at all costs makes us violators of our own dignity. Not owning up to the truth about what we have done, or refusing to take feedback from others for fear of looking bad or being vulnerable, puts our primitive instincts in charge of our lives. What if those instincts are preserving a self that is in desperate need of change?

We are so much more than our hardwired instincts. We can do better. With a little knowledge of what we are all up against, we can win the struggle with these inner forces. They are certainly powerful, but self-knowledge is more powerful. It can focus our attention on the battles worth fighting by recognizing that the biggest and most noble fight is deep within us.

6. What Is the Real Meaning of Dignity? Few people realize its extraordinary impact on our lives.

At about the same time that I realized the powerful role dignity played in resolving conflict, I also became aware of something else. Regardless of where in the world my work takes me, few people understand the true meaning of dignity, and even fewer realize the extraordinary impact it has on our lives and relationships.

That's not to say that people don't react when I use the word "dignity." There is always an immediate recognition of the word and its importance, but when I ask people to define it, or tell me what it looks like to have their dignity honored, the conversation falters.

The most common response people offer is that dignity is about respect. To the contrary, dignity is not the same as respect. Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings; everyone is born with it. Respect, on the other hand, is earned through one's actions.

The general lack of awareness about all matters relating to dignity (including my own) inspired me to learn more, write my book, and speak professionally to help organizations, businesses, and associations build a culture of dignity. I changed the way I helped people resolve their conflicts by starting a dialogue with a "Dignity 101" seminar. Before diving into any conflict, I would sit with both sides and teach them lessons in dignity. When people truly understood what they were discussing, it shattered limits on healing their emotional wounds.

After people learn about dignity, a remarkable thing happens. Everyone recognizes that we all have a deep, human desire to be treated as something of value.

Our shared desire for dignity transcends all of our differences, putting our common human identity above all else. While our uniqueness is important, history has shown us that if we don't take the next step toward recognizing our shared identity, conflicts in our workplace, our personal lives, and between nations will continue to abound.

The glue that holds all of our relationships together is the mutual recognition of the desire to be seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly; to be recognized, understood, and to feel safe in the world. When our identity is accepted and we feel included, we are granted a sense of freedom and independence and a life filled with hope and possibility. And when we are given an apology when someone does us harm, we recognize that even when we fall short of being our best selves, there is always a way to reconnect. "I'm sorry" are two of the most powerful words anyone can utter.

Shades of Dignity

Sarah Lauer

Dignity is blue on the days
when resistance looks like rest,
when the most radical kind of protest
takes the form of self-care,
no room given for judgement
self-criticism refused.
It falls indigo when grief and fear and pain
need their moment to flow freely,
tears un-wilting the sapling stubbornness
growing wild in the bones
of all who yearn for justice.

Dignity is yellow on the days
when strangers become community,
when neighbors have the strength to
set aside petty differences in pursuit
of a larger goal. Amber skips joyful hope
from chant to chant, protest sign to protest sign,
open hand to open heart,
seeding resilience like dandelion tufts
in the souls of a nation of resisters,
a brand of love impossible to eradicate.

Dignity is violet in the places where
politicians choose integrity over self-interest,
when journalists report the news—unsanitized
and real and raw.
It blossoms morning glories through the
oil-slick machinery of government corruption,
vines ensnaring the mad edicts of would-be
dictators
as judges uphold the law,
as civil servants resign rather than
obey illegal orders,

as children leave classrooms in protest of
injustice.

Dignity is bright, and raw, and proud,
and so very much alive, even now.
It flourishes in acts of protest, in the moments
when people choose to live their truth.
It curls inward when greed is chosen over duty,
it shrinks and hides, but even in
those selfish moments, dignity refuses
destruction.

May we have the wisdom to see the dignity
in all people,
and may we find the courage to
coax it out of hiding
and into the light.

Rooted in Dignity

Faithyna Leonard

When I can love myself, I can love others,
For in my heart, a boundless well uncovers.
I will not continue to dishonor my soul,
By pouring from a cup that's cracked and whole.
I cannot grow flowers without tending the earth,
Without the soil's richness, there's no rebirth.
Roots must be nourished, the foundation strong,
Before the blooms rise and sing their song.
I honor my worth in silence and light,
In moments of stillness, I reclaim my might.
The love that I give is the love I first show,
To myself, in the quiet where true peace grows.
No more empty gestures, no more hollow grace,
I stand in my power, I claim my space.
From fertile ground, I rise and I soar,
Rooted in dignity, I'm whole, I'm more.

Family Page
Faithyna Leonard

As we continue our work together to foster a supportive and respectful environment, we wanted to take a moment to reflect on the concept of dignity, which plays a crucial role in how we treat ourselves and others.

Dignity is the inherent worth and respect that every individual deserves, simply by being human. It's about recognizing that each person, regardless of their background, appearance, or circumstances, has the right to be treated with fairness, kindness, and respect. Dignity is not something that needs to be earned; it is something that we all possess. It shapes how we view ourselves and influences how we interact with others. When we honor dignity, we show that we value others not for their external qualities, but for who they are on the inside. In a world where differences are vast and varied, dignity invites us to appreciate those differences and respect the unique qualities in everyone.

With this in mind, we have shared several stories with your children that reflect important lessons about dignity, respect, and kindness. These books highlight the value of seeing the beauty in everyone, learning to appreciate our own growth and transformation, and understanding that dignity is not defined by appearances but by how we treat others.

We encourage you to continue these conversations at home and help your children see the dignity in themselves and in everyone around them. Together, we can create an environment where every child feels valued, respected, and capable of showing kindness to others.

1. Diane Alber, *A Little Respectful Spot*. A small, respectful spot learns how to care for people, places, and things, teaching children that dignity begins with how we treat those around us with consideration.
2. Ross Burach, *The Very Impatient Caterpillar*. A caterpillar struggles with impatience while waiting to transform into a butterfly, teaching that dignity comes from accepting the natural process of growth and personal transformation.
3. Vincent Kelly, *All People Are Beautiful*. This story celebrates the beauty of all people, regardless of appearance. It teaches children that everyone has their own unique beauty and is deserving of respect and dignity.
4. Diane Alber, *STICKS*. Through the metaphor of sticks, this story highlights how everyone is unique and valuable, teaching children to respect differences and appreciate that dignity lies in understanding and honoring our individuality.

* * *

Check Out. What overall message stands out for you?

Chalice Extinguishing. Samuel Ullman: "Maturity is the ability to think, speak and act your feelings within the bounds of dignity. The measure of your maturity is how spiritual you become during the midst of your frustrations."

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