

Living a Life of Dignity – For You and Others

Small Groups: May 2014

As I write this column on dignity; I have just put aside the newspaper, which featured news of the tragic shootings at two Jewish communities outside of Kansas City. Confronted by this news, I am reminded again how vital our first principle is “to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people.”

The Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire said: "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human." Teachings, language, laws and policies that undermine the worth and dignity of others is a part of dehumanization – taking away the humanity of another, of creating an “otherness” to a group of people.

It is a fair question to ask whether those who perpetuate cruelty and violence have worth and dignity. Our answer must be - if we are to encourage in ourselves as well as others the fullest development of our humanity - that all people, no matter their wrongs, must be treated with respect and dignity. It doesn't mean there are not consequences for wrong doing, but to write someone off as unworthy of respect, comes not only to undermine their humanity, but our own. This isn't the easiest lesson to learn or follow. In the face of being disrespected we often want to respond in kind, but this ultimately undermines not just the dignity of another, but our own.

One of the most important lessons of our first principle is a reminder of the inherent worth of others and also of our own. Developing a strong internal sense of one's own dignity and worth is crucial to withstanding the attacks that people or society can throw at us for who we are, how we live or what we believe. It is also essential for helping us to respond to these situations in ways that affirm our own dignity and that of others. Ruth Braunstein's story of her Uncle John featured in the May Horizons reminds us how dignity is something we must discover, cultivate and hold onto within ourselves. Despite so many cruelties and indignities, Ruth's uncle maintained his own sense of worth and dignity, and treated others with dignity and respect, even when they showed him none.

Our first principle is one of the hardest to live by. It calls us to honor our own worth – to treat ourselves with worth and dignity – but also to respond to others, even our enemies, even those we disagree with, with honesty and truth telling, yes, but also, always, with respect for their worth and dignity. To do so is the only way to honor our vocation of becoming fully human.

In the face of wrong that we cannot undo, acts that tear apart the bonds that bind each to all, we must continue to develop in ourselves and in our children – and in our corners of the world – positive and dignified ways to move our world forward. We must respond to injustice with justice, to disrespect with dignity, and commit ever more resolutely to worth the dignity of *all* people.

Yours in love,
Rev. Susan

Living the Theme: Experiencing Wisdom

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience dignity and what living a life of dignity might mean to you. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience dignity and what you learned from the practice.

1. Careful Listening and Attentiveness to Others

How do you show respect and dignity to another person? How do you convey to another person that you see their inherent worth? A Worship Associate suggests: “Nothing beats careful listening to what others have to say.” Try to spend an entire day just listening carefully to what others say. Try not to talk unless absolutely necessary, and really concentrate on what other people are saying, feeling, experiencing. Come to your group ready to share what the experience was like.

2. Learn the Names of the People around You

Jennifer Louden says, “Real connection creates dignity.” Many say it is more difficult to treat others poorly when you know them. Try to be mindful of learning the names of everyone who serves you, or everyone you meet. Think about this with respect to the people who you see regularly at the store, or the dry cleaner, or your postal carriers. Learn their names, write them down in your calendar. Does this make a difference in how you see them or in your connection to them?

3. Take this Quiz on Privilege

My guess is everyone has had an experience of not being treated with dignity, of not being treated as worthy. However, one’s level of privilege in a society can affect how often or how rare these experiences are. Here is one online quiz asking “How Privileged Are You?” It is not the most in-depth survey, but taking it can be eye-opening to how experiences of society and safety change based on one’s identity.

This exercise is an invitation to take the quiz and reflect on the dignity deficits in our society: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/how-privileged-are-you>

Some Questions to Think and Talk About

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

- 1. How do you experience dignity in your own life? What experiences have you had where you felt your inherent worth and dignity were honored?**
- 2. Have you ever had to respond to indignity with dignity?** Have you had an experience where you were disrespected and had to, or were able to, respond without attacking the other person or falling into self-loathing or internalizing the negativity? **Have you ever responded to indignity or disrespect with disrespect? How did that situation make you feel? What was the outcome?**
- 3. How do you show respect and dignity to another person? How do you convey to another person that you see their inherent worth?**
- 4. Describe an occasion where your dignity was abridged or assaulted. What was your emotional response to the event?**
- 5. What does it mean to you to age with dignity? How does the aging process, or even our society's perception of aging, impact how we experience or understand dignity as we age?**
- 6. Do you think people have inherent worth and dignity? If so, what do you perceive to be the source or origins?**
- 7. Do you wrestle with the meaning and aspiration of our first principle and if so how? What makes it challenging to live out?**
- 8. Are there people for whom you find it hard to see or accept their worth and dignity? What is that like? How might you begin to treat them or speak of them with respect?**
- 9. What conditions in your life allow dignity to flourish, both your own and your perception of others? What conditions in society might also foster increasing mutual dignity and respect?**
- 10. How do you explain the presence of cruelty and violence, if worth and dignity really is inherent in all people?**
- 11. Are there situations where you feel you may have treated others without respect for their worth and dignity? What led to those experiences and has there been reconciliation or growth since the experience?**
- 12. What kinds of things, both external and internal, prevent you from fully experiencing your own worth and dignity?**

Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Dignity

: the quality of being worthy of esteem or respect

: a way of appearing or behaving that suggests seriousness and self-control

: bearing, conduct, or speech indicative of self-respect or appreciation of the formality or gravity of an occasion or situation.

Latin: worthy

The only kind of dignity which is genuine is that which is not diminished by the indifference of others. -Dag Hammarskjold

Real connection creates dignity.
- Jennifer Louden

Dignity is as essential to human life as water, food and oxygen. The stubborn retention of it, even in the face of extreme physical hardship, can hold a soul in the body long past the point at which the body should have surrendered it. Without dignity, identity is erased.
- Laura Hillenbrand

Love your neighbor as yourself
- Leviticus 19:18

Remember, what you possess in the world will be found at the day of your death to belong to someone else, but what you are will be yours forever.
- Henry Van Dyke

Every life deserves a certain amount of dignity, no matter how poor or damaged the shell that carries it. - Rick Bragg

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.

- Max de Pree

The rapprochement of peoples is only possible when differences of culture and outlook are respected and appreciated rather than feared and condemned, when the common bond of human dignity is recognized as the essential bond for a peaceful world. - J. William Fulbright

Many, Many Loves By Marge Piercy

So many things we can love
a man, a woman, a friend, a cat.
We can love a sugar maple
turning orange from the bottom up;
we can love a weeping beech
with its twisting arms, the lush tent
branches make sweeping the ground.

We can love a pond, a shore, a boat.
We can love a painting, a flag,
abstractions like honor and country.
We can love icons and temples.
A house, a yard, a woods, a path
that leads us wandering toward
the place we'd most like to be.

Some can love a car - I never could -
a book, a doll, a necklace or ring.
Some can love family and some can't.
Some - the luckiest - can love
themselves without narcissism,
just saying, *Well, I am this. I could do
better now and probably I will.*

Self-respect is the fruit of discipline; the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say "no" to oneself. - Abraham Joshua Heschel

If we should be so lucky as to touch the lives of many, so be it. But if our lot is no more than the setting of a table, or the tending of a garden, or showing a child a path in a wood, our lives are no less worthy. - Kent Nerburn

One's dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but cannot be taken away unless it is surrendered. - Michael J. Fox

Dignity does not come from avenging insults, especially from violence than can never be justified. It comes from taking responsibility and advancing our common humanity.

- Hillary Clinton

Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no bird sang there except those that sang best. - Henry Van Dyke

Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human. - Paolo Freire

Dignity becomes more real when you feel the lack of it first hand or when you stand up for someone else's dignity. - Worship Associate

This subject is a bit of a tough one for me, because as a white, middle class, well-educated American, I'm not sure anyone has ever seriously denied me dignity. I have simply taken it for granted all my life. I need to remind myself that not everyone is that lucky and to be more sensitive to those who have experienced humiliation of one kind or another. At any rate, the older I get, the easier it is to concentrate on granting dignity to others rather than worrying about my own. - Small Group Facilitator

By indignities men come to dignities.

- Francis Bacon

Truly Great by Stephen Spender

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through endless corridors of light where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the spirit clothed head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious is never to forget.
The delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in the worlds before our earth;
Never to deny its pleasure in the simple morning light,
Nor its grave evening demand for love;
Never to allow the traffic to smother
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields
See how these names are feted by the waving grass,
And by the streamers of white cloud,
And whispers of wind in the listening sky;
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun they traveled a short while toward the sun,
And left a vivid air signed with their honour.

Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent - Eleanor Roosevelt

Not what you possess, but what you do with what you have, determines your true worth.

- Thomas Carlyle

A wise man has dignity without pride; a fool has pride without dignity. - Confucius

While we would wish that the world would accept that every person has an inherent dignity to live a life of equal and inalienable rights; freedom, justice and peace, that is unlikely to ever happen in a universal sense. However, many of the heroes of mankind are the people who found the inner strength to establish their own purpose, to carve a path of responsible actions in their relationships, their work and to the environment that we call the Universe. This is a Dignity that is unassailable. - Small Group Facilitator

There is a healthful hardiness about real dignity that never dreads contact and communion with others however humble. -Washington Irving

Even though our Inherent worth and dignity is truly based upon the spirit of life in all of us, it is experienced in and affected by the body. There are so many judgments that we make about ourselves and others based on the appearances of our bodies or the body's capabilities or perceived deficits. I vividly recall a time when I was in 4th grade. I went to school at an elementary school with an indoor pool. The school issued us all bathing suits to wear. Unfortunately, the suits were color coded by size. I was the only girl issued a maroon suit. I was teased and humiliated. I loved swimming but the class ruined that. It was so unnecessary. It was already difficult being overweight, but the suit made it so much worse. I was clearly different-- the fat girl. No one seemed to care about the pain I was experiencing. That became part of the indignity-- the message was that it didn't matter how others treated me because fat people don't matter. From that painful experience, I learned empathy for "the other" and I am grateful for that lesson. This recognition helps restore my dignity. But an old sadness surfaces when I shop in stores that relegate larger women's sizes to some obscure corner of the store--often on another floor. Why? The unsaid message is: you don't matter as much as thinner people and even this many years later, it still feels bad.

- Worship Associate

Pretentiousness, true dignity is not
- Small Group Facilitator

Natural dignity of mind or manners can never be concealed; it even commands our respect: assumed dignity, or importance, excites our ridicule and contempt. - Joseph Bartlett

Place confers no dignity upon men; like a balloon, the higher they rise the smaller they look.
- G.D. Prentice

Don't walk behind me, I may not lead-
Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow-
Just walk beside me and be my friend.
- Albert Camus

Do we talk about the dignity of work? Do we give our students any reason for believing it is worthwhile to sacrifice for their work because such sacrifices improve the psychological and mental health of the person who makes them?
- Sargeant Shriver

No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.
- Booker T. Washington

Dignity can be defined as the quality or state of being worthy of esteem or support. Having the innate right to be valued and to receive ethical and just treatment. Having self-respect and feelings of self-worth. - Small Group Facilitator

Any assault on one's dignity is generally an assault on one's identity. For a period of our lives family, society and environment build our identities. When we choose to become self-aware and know in our own minds who we want to be, then we begin building the identity of our true self. It is easy for someone to disparage us through criticism of our looks, our education, our race, our national origin, our religion, or any number of "identities" bestowed by people or society. However, if we are living the identity we have built for ourselves, and we are firm in our faith and knowledge that that this is our true self, there is a shield against outside criticism and disparagement.
- Small Group Facilitator

Councils
by Marge Piercy

We must sit down and reason together.
Perhaps we should sit in the dark.
In the dark we could propose and describe and suggest.
In the dark we could not see who speaks and only the words would say what they say.
No one would speak more than twice.
No one would speak less than once.
Thus saying what we feel and what we want, what we fear for ourselves and each other into the dark.
Perhaps we could begin to listen....
After each speaks, she or he will say a ritual phrase:
It is not I who speaks but the wind.
Wind blows through me.
Long after me, is the wind.

In this moment of silence, a still, small voice speaks within me; it speaks of what it means to be made in the likeness of the Divine. It says: Come to the end of each day feeling that you have used its gifts wisely and faced its trials bravely. Be tender and understanding toward the members of your family. Do your work faithfully, even when no one's eye is upon you. Try to judge others with compassion, and to love them as yourself. How do I know what it means to be made in "the likeness of the Divine?" As I learn to see the divinity in every person, so I become ever more conscious of my own dignity as a child of God.

- Rabbi Chaim Stern

Online Articles, Videos and Podcasts

Essay from [Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire](http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/107992.shtml). An excellent highlighting the importance of, compassion, mutual dignity and paradise in the early Christian Church, in contrast to the emphasis on the Crucifixion that developed almost 900 years after Jesus lived. From Unitarian Universalist Minister and former President of Starr King School for the Ministry, Rebecca Parker, and her colleague Rita Nakashima Brock. (The entire book is listed later) <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/107992.shtml>

This is a powerful story about how restoring the dignity of the body leads to healing and wholeness: <http://www.ted.com/talks/alberto-cairo-there-are-no-scrap-of-men>

This is a great TED talk from supermodel Geena Rocero and her own story of the importance of coming out as transgender: <http://www.ted.com/talks/geena-rocero-why-i-must-come-out>

Check out The Dignity Project at <http://www.dignityproject.org>

Books and Movies

On death, dying and dignity: [The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade](#) by Thomas Lynch. "[Lynch] brings the lessons of death to life, and turns life and death into art." —*Time Out New York*

[If I Should Wake Before I Die](#) by Lamont Satterly (author) and Michael Boyle (illustrator). A (more appropriate) twist on the children's bedtime prayer

[Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire](#), © 2008 by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (Beacon Press).