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Spirituality · Community · Justice

How to Cultivate a Culture of Dignity

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
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frederickuu.org

The opening lines of the Roman Catholic Catechism affirm that, "The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God." And while you can hold that belief and be fully within the big tent of Unitarian Universalism, the UU First Principle makes a more radical claim for "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," irrespective of anything else. Because this claim is right there at the top of our list—our First Principle!—it is easy to become so accustomed to it over time that we forget what a powerful statement it isto affirm "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Yet we should never take this significant starting point for granted, because historically, it has certainly not always been the case that "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" has been recognized and respected—even by Unitarians and Universalists.

In 1961, when the American Unitarian Association consolidated with the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, we originally had Six Principles that were similar, but in a different order that the ones we know today. The Principles were revised in 1985, in particular to make them more gender inclusive. And in 1961 when we affirmed "the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man," a major influence on that choice was probably the 1948 United Nations's "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." The very first line of its preamble recognizes that, "the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the

world…." Likewise, following the preamble, the very first sentence of Article I says, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The writing and passage of a "Universal Declaration of Human Rights,"a direct result of the horrors of World War II, which ended in 1945, was a terrifying reminder of our capacity as a species to violate the dignity of our fellow human beings in horrific ways. In contrast, I find it to be profound, powerful, and hopeful to be part of a religious movement that has explicitly chosen to weave into our First Principle the starting point of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Respect and support for human dignity are also foundational to the Geneva Convention, which was passed the next year in 1949, and reminds us that "all human beings" and "every person" really means *everyone,* even prisoners of war. The Geneva Convention prohibits both "cruel treatment and torture" as well as "outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment" such as the now infamous Abu Ghraib prison scandal. (The exception to "every person" is active combatants.)

This background is one reason that human rights organizations such as the UU Service Committee have spoken out against torture — including when torture is veiled behind Orwellian double-speak and called "enhanced interrogation techniques." When we violate one another's dignity, we risk devolving into a world of violence, cruelty, and "might makes right." As Harvard professor Michael Rosen said in his short but important 2012 book Dignity: Its History and Meaning, "the barriers that separate… modern liberal democracy from the barbarism and atrocity that disfigured the twentieth century (and show every sign of counting through the twenty-first) are very, very fragile" (159).

Rosen also fascinatingly traces the ways that what is seen to follow from the starting point of human dignity is very different, depending on one's perspective. For example:

- Many conservative theologians argue that human dignity means that from conception through death, one should not artificially end a human life. At the same time, the internationally-known organization *Dignitas* argues that human dignity requires allowing the choice of physician-assisted "death with dignity" in the right

circumstances.

- Similarly, many conservative theologians argue that human dignity does not conflict with their opposition to same-sex relationships, whereas the organization Dignity USA holds that the only way to respect the dignity of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people is to recognize the full legitimacy of their relationships.
- Or there is the student who was expelled from a university for wearing a very short dress, which the school characterized as "a flagrant lack of respect for…academic dignity." The student countersued on the basis of her "trampled dignity." (6-7).

Rosen summarizes these two sides ends of the spectrum:

> For [many religious conservatives], human dignity gives life a value that may properly override the choices made by the individual living it. On the other hand, for liberals in the United States in particular, dignity is identified with autonomy in the sense of individuals' right to choose for themselves how to live (and die). (126)

For those here a few weeks ago, you may rightly be hearing echoes of my Election sermon on the differences between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine as paradigmatic of our contemporary left and right.

Perhaps the most important point that is behind both of those sides of the coin is that we as a species are increasingly choosing to universalize *dignity* to *all* human beings, which was by no means an inevitable choice then or now (8). Historically, dignity has much more often been the privilege of the aristocratic few rather than a characteristic of every human being (38-39).

In that spirit, allow me to bring one more book into the conversation: Dr. Donna Hicks' book with Yale University Press, Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict. Dr. Hicks has been working with international conflict resolution for decades, and the forward to her book is written by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. She has seen many global conflicts begin to be transformed when past indignities are named aloud, and when both parties begin to again see the other side as no longer subhuman, but instead, as possessing worth and dignity. She writes that her essential message is simple: "Demonstrate the care and attention for yourself and others than anything of value deserves…. Don't miss an opportunity to exert the power you have to remind

others of who they are: invaluable, priceless, and irreplaceable. Remind yourself, too" (3). Indeed, one of the most powerful lines in her book is a testimony from a Latin American political official who said, regarding Hicks' Dignity Model of negotiations: "Not only did you help the relationships in this room — I think you also saved my marriage" (2)

Along those lines, I should pause here to say that I chose to preach on the topic of dignity today in honor of a former President of this congregation, Carl Kruhm, who died a little more than a month ago. Carl's service as President of our Board of Trustees was cut short in its first year by his cancer diagnosis. When I spoke with Carl about his vision for this congregation, a major theme of our conversation was his interest in dignity. And the two books I have drawn on for this sermon by Rosen and Hicks are ones he gave me before he died. Part of Carl's legacy for us is a challenge to live more fully into our First Principle — what Donna Hicks calls creating "a 'culture of dignity' in which everyone would be aware of how easy it is to inflict painful wounds on one anothers's dignity"—and accordingly, to "learn how to extend dignity to one another and create an environment in which people look forward to being together because they feelvalued" (16).

The desire to create a "culture of dignity" is related to why Carl spent so much time, along with a number of other members of this congregation, volunteering with the Alternatives to Violence Project, which works with prison inmates (and is part of The Community Correctional Services Committee . I'll be saying more about that perspective, which will include some testimonies about the "Alternatives to Violence Project" in a forthcoming sermon in December on Nonviolent Communication. For now, related to the need to be intentional about creating a "culture of dignity," consider just one study of 2,500 people imprisoned for murder. "When asked why they felt compelled to kill, the majority of the inmates responded, 'Because I felt disrespected'" (38).

Conversely, Nelson Mandela, although not an exemplar of nonviolence in his early days, became a stunning example of sustaining a culture of dignity even in some of the worst circumstances. After being wrongfully imprisoned for more than twenty-seven years by the apartheid government, Mandela said a day after his release in 1990,

“I knew that people expected me to harbor anger toward whites. But I had none. In prison, my anger toward whites decreased, but my hated for the system grew. I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another…. Whites are fellow South Africans and we want them to feel safe and to know that we appreciate the contribution that they have made toward the development of this country” (75). What a powerful testimony of the inherent worth and dignity of *every person* — even the many persons on both sides of that struggle who committed terrible injustices.

Part of what inspired this view in Mandela — and helped him claim both his own inherent worth and dignity—and that in others — was the poem “Invictus”:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

What, then, might it look like in more everyday circumstances to help create a culture of dignity? One crucial piece of advice Hicks gives is, “Don’t take the bait. Don’t let the

bad behavior of others determine your own. Restraint is the better part of dignity. Don't justify getting even. Do not do unto others as they do unto you if it will cause harm" (93).

But when conflicts inevitably happen, the following recommendations summarize her framework for reconciliation—one that honor each person's dignity:

> First, both parties must agree that sitting down together is worthy of their time and attention. Isn't it much more common to withdraw from those with whom we have been in conflict and refuse to talk to them?
>
> Second, listen without interrupting or challenging each other's story…. Listen to seek understanding. Isn't it much more common for us to listen to our adversaries only to one-up them or to prepare our attack on what they have said?
>
> Third, acknowledge and recognize what the other has been through. Isn't it much more common to stare without expression at the person we have injured in the heat of a conflict and feel defensive or justified?
>
> Fourth, honor and acknowledge each other's integrity, and in so doing, create a mutual bond. (185)

And so, in the days to come, I invite you to experiment with what it feels like with the many different people you encounter to hear echoing in your ear: "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," which includes both yourself and the other facing you.

To close with a blessing from Desmond Tutu, which I believe is also the legacy and challenge Carl Kruhm wished to leave us, may we all become "agents of dignity" — of the inherent worth and dignity of every person: "accept it in yourself, discover and encourage it in others, and peace may just be possible" (x).