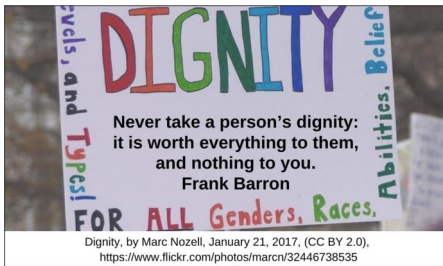




EXPLORATION

Worth & Dignity

Readings



Dignity, by Mare Nozell, January 21, 2017, (CC BY 2.0), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/marcn/32446738535>

1. *Human Being versus Human Doing* by Leland R. Beaumont

Dignity—the quality of worth and honor intrinsic to every person—establishes basic entitlements that are the inalienable birthright of every human. It is our intrinsic legitimacy. We are worthy simply because we exist. Dignity is the threshold level of status required to meet basic human needs. It establishes the basic boundaries of humanity. Indignity—trespassing into the territory established by dignity—is the essence of insult, humiliation, and the root of anger, shame, and hate. This trespass is the basic tool of tyranny, oppression, and coercion. All of history is the quest for dignity. We are worthy simply because we are alive; it is a cruel injustice to deny someone their inalienable worth. Dignity is a congruence between the respect we demonstrate and the intrinsic legitimacy of each person.

The intrinsic worth of humans is acknowledged whenever we fawn over newborn babies. Although the infant has not yet accomplished anything, it is universally regarded as precious and worthy of care, attention, and respect. This is the distinction between human *being* and human *doing*.

Source: <http://www.emotionalcompetency.com/dignity.htm>

2. *Dignity's Shallow Roots* by Remy Debes

...Why think the concept of human dignity is tenuous? In the first place, it is

very young. The term is not in any existing copy of the Magna Carta (1215). It does show up much later in the English Bill of Rights (1689), but not with a moralized meaning. People were not yelling ‘*Liberté, égalité, dignité!*’ during the French Revolution. And for all its fiery rhetoric about equality and “inalienable” rights, the US Declaration of Independence does not speak of human dignity. Nor does the US Constitution.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights used dignity to justify itself: a conceptual watershed.

You won’t find any moralized talk of human dignity in any of the old slave narratives. And it isn’t in the passionate abolitionist speeches, pamphlets and newspaper editorials of the 19th century. Ditto for suffrage. Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Susan B Anthony, Jane Austen, Harriet Beecher Stowe: none used the term much, and almost never with its moralized meaning. In fact, until at least 1850, the English term ‘dignity’ had *no* currency as meaning anything like the ‘unearned worth or status of humans’, and very little such currency well into the 1900s. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) used the terminology of human dignity to justify itself, this turned out to be a conceptual watershed. We have not been talking about human dignity for long.

Source: <https://aeon.co/essays/human-dignity-is-an-ideal-with-remarkably-shallow-roots>

3. *We Are Each Other's Destiny* by Mary Oliver

...In what is probably the most serious inquiry of my life, I have begun to look past reason, past the provable, in other directions. Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention and that is the precognition of the spiritual side of the world.... I am not talking about having faith necessarily, although one hopes to. What I mean by spirituality is not

theology, but attitude. Such interest nourishes me beyond the finest compendium of facts. ...In any comparison of demonstrated truths and unproven but vivid intuitions, the truths lose.

I would therefore write a kind of elemental poetry that doesn't just avoid indoors but doesn't even *see* the doors that lead inward.... I would not talk about the wind, and the oak tree, and the leaf on the oak tree, but on their behalf. I would talk about the owl and the thunderworm and the daffodil and the red-spotted newt as a company of spirits, as well as bodies. I would say that the fox stepping out over the snow has nerves as fine as mine, and a better courage.

...I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our changes are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family; and there is no decency or sense in honoring one thing, or a few things, and then closing the list. The pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and ourselves – we are at risk together, or we are on our way to a sustainable world together. We are each other's destiny.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28137>

4. *Even Your Enemy Has Dignity* by Walter Wink

Jesus was not content merely to empower the powerless, however, and here his teachings fundamentally transcend Saul Alinsky's. Jesus' sayings about non-retaliation are of one piece with his challenge to love our enemies. Here it is enough to remark that Jesus did not advocate nonviolence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy, but as a just means of opposing the enemy in such a way as to hold open the possibility of the enemy's becoming just as well. Both sides must win.

...Today we can draw on the cumu-

lative historical experience of nonviolent social struggle, ...but the spirit, the thrust, the surge for creative transformation that is the ultimate principle of the universe, is the same we see incarnated in Jesus. ...It seems almost as if his teaching has only now, in this generation, become an inescapable task and practical necessity.

To people dispirited by the enormity of the injustices that crush us and the intractability of those in positions of power, Jesus' words beam hope across the centuries. We need not be afraid. We can reassert our human dignity. We can lay claim to the creative possibilities that are still ours, burlesque the injustice of unfair laws, and force evil out of hiding from behind the facade of legitimacy.

To risk confronting the Powers ...is not likely to attract the faint of heart.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14644>

5. *To Be A Hope* by Cornell West

...I prefer to *be* a hope rather than talk about hope. Being a hope is being in motion, on the move with body on the line, mind set on freedom, soul full of courage, and heart shot through with love. Being a hope is forging moral and spiritual fortitude, putting on intellectual armor, and being willing to live and die for the empowerment of the wretched of the earth.

Race matters in the twenty-first century are part of a moral and spiritual war over resources, power, souls, and sensibilities. In the face of the American way of war — defeat, destroy, devastate — I have the black freedom struggle and the Black musical tradition. I also pull from the rich resources of the LGBTQ communities, the feminist movement, Indigenous peoples' struggles, the environmental justice and otherly-abled communities, and immigrant rights and anti-imperialist organizations. This moral and spiritual way of war—remembrance, reverence, and resurrection—yields a radical love and revolutionary praxis. We remember the great visionary and exemplary figures and movements. These precious memories focus our attention on things that really matter—not spectacle, image, money

and status but integrity, honesty, dignity and generosity. This focus locates and situates us in a long tradition of love warriors—not just polished professionals or glitzy celebrities—but courageous truth tellers who fell in love with the quest of justice, freedom, and beauty. And all great love ...is resurrectionary. All great love transforms death into new life, turns your world upside-down, shatters callousness and indifference, frees you to treat people more decently and humanely, and bids you to choose a life of struggle with a smile and style....

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28560>

6. *Kindness: A Public Statement of Personal Dignity*

by Christopher Titmuss

We can bring loving kindness into many features of our life. There is something very satisfying about contributing to the happiness and security of others, although caring ...makes us vulnerable. We might be misunderstood, overstretched, or caught up in conflict.

...We may profoundly disagree with other people. We may not feel any sympathy for their values and decisions, but we do not have to build a wall of resistance against them. Let's never forget that our blood is all of one color. If we believe they are truly different, we cannot act wisely in the face of fresh information. When our mind hardens, it forms a barrier to our deeper feelings. Then we may make cold, negative judgements that probably won't serve the true interests of others. Where there is kindness, we are willing to struggle with difficult decisions out of respect for others and ourselves.

Some people get the idea that living with kindness is a mistake. Kind people always get walked over, they claim, and so they harden their hearts so that nobody can reach them. That same defensive wall also stops them from reaching deep within themselves. There are risks in kindness. The most obvious one is being taken advantage of by the selfish and the unscrupulous. Yes, that happens, but authentic kindness, tempered with equanimity, will not wither under such exploitation. Our kindness is then a public statement of personal dignity.

Furthermore, a good conscience makes for a soft pillow.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/13577>

7. *Any Other Questions?*

by Rev. Victoria Safford

People ask me sometimes, "Is this a gay church?"

It is a privilege to answer: "Ours is absolutely, gladly, hopefully and humbly, gaily, a gay church, a gay tradition, where everyone, including heterosexual members and friends, is welcome, where everyone is needed, where everyone's experience is cherished as a sacred text, because no one's experience of living or loving can be comprehensive, because each of us holds clues the others need about how to live with dignity and joy as a human person, and none of us knows enough about that yet to be considered whole.

"It is absolutely a gay church, even as ours is a gay world, if you would look around. Gay church, straight church, peoples' church, a human congregation made holy by the holy hopes and fears and dreams of all who wish to come. Come in, we say. Come out, come in. We're all in this together."

I will not speak of "tolerance," with its courteous clenched teeth and bitter resignation. I will not speak about "acceptance," of "other" people and some "other" kind of "lifestyle." I can only look in laughing wonder at human life in all its incarnations. I can taste only in passing the breath of the spirit of life on my mouth and understand our common longing to breathe in deep, deep gulps of it. I cannot think of being anybody else's "ally," even, because even that implies some degree of separation—some degree of safety for some of us, not all. We are "allied" with no one and with nothing but love—the larger Love transcending all our understanding, within which all the different,





Photo by Artem Beliaikin on Unsplash

differing, gorgeously various, variant, beautifully deviant aspects of ourselves are bound in elegant unity.

I know that on some sad and disappointing days these words describe the church that yet shall be and not the church that is. I know, I know.... But I know too that to answer is an act of creation. To answer this question, and some others, is a privilege, a prophetic imperative, a joy, a duty, and a holy sacrament.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/any-other-questions>

Wisdom Story

The Dervish in the Ditch by Elisa Davy Pearmain

Once upon a time, in a land to the east, a Dervish holy man and their student were walking from one village to the next. Suddenly they saw a great huge cloud of dust rising in the distance. They stood and stared at a grand carriage, pulled by six horses approaching at a full gallop. Riding on top were two liveries dressed in red, each holding a rein. The Dervish and the young student soon realized that the carriage was not going to slow down, let alone veer to the side to avoid hitting them. The carriage was coming at such a speed that they had to throw themselves from the road and jump into a ditch to save themselves. Covered with dirt and grass, the two got up. They looked after the carriage as it sped away into the distance.

The student was first to respond. They began to call out and curse the drivers. But the teacher ran ahead, cupped his hands over the student's mouth, and called to the carriage: "May all of your deepest desires be satisfied!"

The student stared at the teacher and asked, "Why would you wish that their deepest desires be satisfied? They nearly

killed us!"

The old Dervish replied, "Do you think all their deepest desires are satisfied, that they know their worth and dignity, let alone ours? If they were happy and fulfilled, would they be so thoughtless and cruel as to nearly run down an old man and a student?"

The young student had no answer, for they were deep in thought. And so, in silence, the two continued their journey down the dusty road.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session13/dervish-ditch>

Snippets

"The legendary French aviation pioneer and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote: "I have no right to say or do anything that diminishes a man in his own eyes. What matters is not what I think of him, but what he thinks of himself. Hurting a man in his dignity is a crime.""

Dale Carnegie

"When identity is based on outward titles, material possessions, academic achievements or even relationship status, we place ourselves in a very fragile state. Until we are simply "enough" because of who we are "being" and not because of what we are "doing," our self-esteem and worth will continue to be "tossed to and fro," as our outer conditions are subject to change."

Shannon Tanner

"No daylight to separate us. Only kinship. Inching ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship.... Soon we imagine ...this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away." *Gregory Boyle*

"Anyone can take a picture of poverty; it's easy to focus on the dirt and hurt of the poor. It's much harder—and much more needful—to pry under that dirt and reveal the beauty and dignity of people that, but for their birth into a place and circumstance different from our own, are just like ourselves. I want my images to tell the story of those people and to move us beyond pity to justice and mercy." *David duChemin*

"It has always been my view that terrorism is not spawned by the poverty of money; it is spawned by the poverty of dignity. Humiliation is the most underestimated force in international relations and in human relations. It is when people or nations are humiliated that they really lash out and engage in extreme violence." *Thomas L. Friedman*

"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe." *Elie Wiesel*

"The best thing about coming out is, it's totally liberating. You feel like you've made this incredible discovery about yourself and you want to share it and be open and honest and not spend all your time wondering how is this person going to react, or should I be careful around this person, or what will the neighbors say? And it's more. It's about getting past the question of what's wrong with me, to knowing there's nothing wrong, that you were born this way. You're a normal person and a beautiful person and you should be proud of who you are. You deserve to live with dignity and show people your pride." *Julie Anne Peters*

"When the culture of any organization mandates that it is more important to protect the reputation of a system and those in power than it is to protect the



basic human dignity of the individuals who serve that system or who are served by that system, you can be certain that the shame is systemic, the money is driving ethics, and the accountability is all but dead.” *Brené Brown*

“Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.” *Chimamanda Adichie*

Dignity has three broad meanings. There is an historically old sense of poise or gravitas that we still associate with refined manners, and expect of those with high social rank. In this sense, dignity is almost synonymous with “dignified.” Much more common is the family of meanings associated with self-esteem and integrity, which is what we tend to mean when we talk of a person’s own “sense of dignity” or when we say, for example, “they robbed him of his dignity.” Third, there is the more abstract but no less widespread meaning of human dignity as an inherent or unearned worth or status, which all human beings share equally. This is its *moralized* connotation.... *Remy Debes*

Questions

The following questions are for your consideration.

1. In reading #1, Leland Beaumont reminds us that the tool of tyranny is indignity, which uses insult, humiliation, ...anger, shame, and hate. When have you seen an attempt to strip someone of their dignity? How does this diminish an individual?
2. In reading #2, Remy Debes points

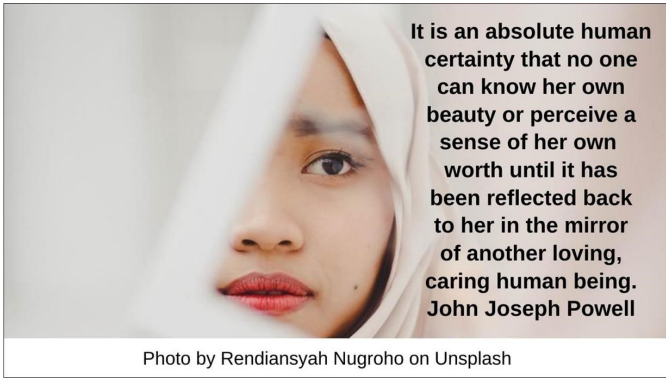
out that the term “human dignity” does not have a long history in human relationships, emerging forcefully in 1948 in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

What limits the embrace of human dignity personally and politically?

3. In reading #3, poet Mary Oliver connects the human with nature by affirming that, “We are each other’s destiny.” We limit “inherent worth and dignity to humans. Would it be more appropriate to extend worth and dignity to all of creation? Why or why not?
4. In reading #4, Walter Wink recalls the revolutionary teachings of Jesus, which included loving our enemies. What are the benefits of recognizing the dignity of our enemies? The liabilities?
5. In reading #5, Cornel West talks about “being” a hope, rather than just being hopeful. By this, he invites us to embody hope by practicing a radical love. To treat people decently and humanely acknowledges their inherent worth and dignity. How would treating each other in this way transform the world?
6. In reading #6, Christopher Titmuss counsels us that our acts of kindness are a public statement of our dignity. Often, we suggest that respect is a way to acknowledge the worth and dignity of another. Which do you think is more powerful related to worth and dignity: respect or kindness? Why?
7. In reading #7, Rev. Victoria Safford writes about Unitarian Universalism’s embrace of GLBTQ individuals. How is being a gay church a source of organizational pride for UU congregations? By contrast, how do anti-gay churches undermine human dignity?
8. In the story, *The Dervish in the Ditch*, who do you identify with more: the student or the dervish? Why? In addition to respect and kindness in affirming worth and dignity, what role might forgiveness play in this regard?

The following questions are related to the Snippets.

9. Dale Carnegie quotes Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “Hurting a man in his dignity is a crime.” What would it mean if we took human dignity this seriously?
10. Shannon Tanner contrasts the effects of basing identity on “doing” versus “being.” When “doing” is emphasized self-esteem, dignity, and worth are put at risk. How have you balanced your identity between “being” and “doing?” What, if anything, makes this hard to do?
11. Gregory Boyle asks that we “stand ...with those whose dignity has been denied.” What does the denial of dignity do to people? Have you known people whose dignity has been denied? What did you learn from them?
12. David duChemin suggests that it is difficult to see the beauty and dignity of the poor and dispossessed. Why is this the case? He suggests that these people are just like you. Do you agree? Why or why not?
13. Thomas L. Friedman writes about the poverty of dignity that is caused by humiliation of individuals, groups, and nations. This also seems to be a feature of political tribal warfare. What leads to the impulse to humiliate others? What are the consequences of humiliating others on the humiliator and the humiliated? Do the humiliators forfeit their dignity? Why or why not? How do/can people deal with humiliation to maintain their dignity?
14. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel insists that we must act whenever human dignity is in jeopardy. Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the challenges in doing this? In a more immediate context, what is the challenge of treating everyone we meet with dignity? What is the benefit?
15. Julie Ann Peters writes about the liberation of coming out of the closet. It is a means of embracing one’s dignity and expressing one’s pride. There are others who are in the closet: people with a mental illness, an addiction (past or current), a criminal record, failure in a career, who are a victim of abuse, etc.



Sometimes these are a source of shame. How can these affect one's dignity? How can shame, specifically, undermine a sense of dignity? In the context of shame, how can dignity be restored?

16. Brené Brown writes that organizations can place their own reputation above the human dignity of their employees or those they serve. This can apply to nations, political parties, etc. When this happens, shame is systemic, money undermines ethics, and there is no accountability. These conditions are sometimes revealed by whistleblowers. Relative to employees, how is their dignity undermined when they are aware of these conditions and do nothing?
17. Chimamanda Adichie writes that stories can break the dignity of a people or repair that broken dignity. As an example, how did the story of Nelson Mandela repair the dignity of South Africans? How did the stories/statements shared at The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa restore dignity and heal the country? How did the story of Kamala Harris enhance the dignity of people of color in America, especially women and girls of color given her nomination as the Vice-Presidential candidate of the Democratic Party?
18. Remy Debes writes that the moral dimension of dignity emerges when it is understood as being inherent, that is, as being unearned. How can an ethic based on dignity motivate being more inclusive and welcoming of diversity?

