

Reflections on Love and Dignity in Resolving Conflict

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The author’s previous work focused attention on the ways that violations of dignity negatively impacted relationships in conflict and on developing ways to address this issue. What emerged after a discussion of the underlying dignity injuries felt by both sides was not only a pathway to resolve the conflict but in addition, an overwhelming sense of inner peace for the participants as well as a newfound intimacy and connection between them. This article explores the positive role that dignity plays in enhancing loving human connection.

Keywords: dignity, elements of dignity, dignity violations, conflict, conflict resolution, human connection, love

Autobiographical Introduction

After twenty years facilitating discussions for parties in intractable conflicts around the world, I came to the conclusion that I was missing something significant in my understanding of conflict. Why was it that parties struggling to bring an end to violence were not able to achieve an agreement about how to put the past to rest and find a way to peace? The people with whom I worked were highly intelligent, well educated, and well positioned to bring about change. They all had a deep desire to end the suffering in their communities. What was it that was holding them back, even when it was obvious that it was in their interest to find a solution to the problems that divided them? What were we missing?

We were missing an understanding of an aspect central to being human. Futurist John Naisbitt claims: “The most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st century will not occur because of technology, but because of an expanding concept of what it means to be human.” What I had missed all those years was an understanding of the role that dignity plays in our lives and how important it is to all of us to be treated as if we were something of value. It is a universal human yearning. Dignity is at the core of what it means to be human.

The truth about dignity is simple: *We all want to be treated as if we matter and when we are not, we suffer. Inversely, when our inherent value and worth is honored and recognized, we thrive.* The longing to be treated with dignity is our highest common denominator, yet we have failed to leverage the power that is inherent in this simple truth.

After recognizing that *unaddressed and unhealed wounds to dignity* were at the root of the conflicts I had been working on over the years, I realized that these injuries were keeping the conflicts alive, making it difficult to sign on to an agreement. I started to think about a way to focus attention on these injuries and to bring them into our discussions.

I started researching dignity and came up short when I reviewed the literature to get answers to my questions. What I wanted to know was: *Why does being treated as if we matter feel so important to us? What does it look like when someone violates dignity? What does it look like to have our dignity*

honored and recognized? What would it take to heal the wounds to dignity? I was looking for practical answers that could guide me through a healing process with my participants.

Evelin Lindner has written extensively about the role of dignity and humiliation in international conflict.¹ She opened doors that made a significant contribution to how we are all vulnerable to having our dignity violated. She was the first to raise our consciousness about the negative effects of humiliation in conflict.

Philosophers were knowledgeable about the meaning of dignity, but they were more concerned with defining and dissecting it than working with it to bring an end to conflict. After reviewing the literature, I realized I had to find my own answers to the questions I was asking. It led to my first book, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*.² I developed the “Dignity Model”: an approach to addressing this human dimension of conflict that had been neglected and unexplored as an underlying cause of conflict. The main building blocks of the model are the *Ten Elements of Dignity* and the *Ten Temptations to Violate Dignity*.

The *Ten Elements of Dignity* are the result of interviewing people from all over the world, asking them to tell me about a time they felt their dignity had been both violated and honored. They were mostly people living in conflict zones as well as students from my classes. The stories they told me, no matter where they were in the world, all had a similar theme. The context and circumstances may have been influenced by their culture, but at the end of the day, consistent patterns emerged. Here are the ten ways that people experienced an honoring of their dignity:

Essential Elements of Dignity

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. [L] [SEP]

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. [L] [SEP]

Acknowledgment—Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating, and responding to their concerns and what they have been through. [L] [SEP]

Inclusion—Make others feel that they belong at all levels of relationship (family, community, organization, nation). [L] [SEP]

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, and they feel free to speak without fear of retribution. [L] [SEP]

Fairness—Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way, according to agreed-upon laws and rules. [L] [SEP]

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. [L] [SEP]

¹ Evelin Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006); Evelin Lindner, *Emotion and Conflict* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009); Evelin Lindner, *Gender, Humiliation and Global Security* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2010).

² Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

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. ^[1]_[SEP]

Benefit of the Doubt—Treat people as trustworthy; start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity. ^[1]_[SEP]

Accountability—Take responsibility for your actions; if you have violated the dignity of another, apologize; make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors. ^[1]_[SEP]

What has become clear working with parties in conflict is that often, all of the elements of dignity are violated. For example, when people are living under occupation, they experience multiple violations listed above. When people are being discriminated against simply because they belong to a minority population in a country, they also feel unrecognized, misunderstood, excluded, and not given the benefit of the doubt. It is rare that only one or two elements are involved. It explains why people who feel their dignity has been assaulted feel so bad.

Another important piece of information to be considered when trying to understand dignity as a significant contributor to the breakdown in relationships goes back again to an understanding of what it means to be human.

After exploring the literature in evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology, I discovered that human beings do not enter the world with a blank slate. We have preprogrammed into our brains behaviors and reactions that are incited when we find ourselves in circumstances of threat. Our “instincts” kick in and all they want to do is help us survive. Self-preservation is the key motivator of these hardwired impulses that are all a part of our shared humanity. While everyone has heard of the fight, flight, and freeze instincts, we have other behavioral predispositions that get triggered when we experience threatening situations. These other reactions I call the *Ten Temptations to Violate Dignity*—ways that evolution has set us up to protect ourselves from looking bad in the eyes of others. In evolutionary terms, the desire to look good was important because people who were shunned from the group for bad behavior ran the risk of death. There was safety in numbers (from all kinds of external predators) and if one was cast out, survival was at stake. When our early ancestors felt that their image was on the line, they would be lured by these ten temptations: *Taking the bait, saving face, shirking responsibility, false dignity, false security, avoiding confrontation and conflict, assuming innocent victim, resisting feedback, blaming and shaming others, and gossiping.* The Dignity Model suggests the following to save oneself from being lured by these temptations and violating one’s own dignity:

Temptations to Violate Dignity

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 returning the harm when someone has harmed you. Do not do unto others as they do unto you.

Don’t get caught in the temptation to save face.
Don’t lie, cover up, deceive yourself—tell the truth about what you have done.

Don’t shirk responsibility when you have violated the dignity of others.
Admit that you made a mistake and apologize for hurting them.

Don't be lured by false dignity. Beware of the desire for external recognition of your dignity in the form of approval and praise. If we depend on others alone for validation of our worth—we are seeking false dignity. Our dignity also comes from within.

Don't be lured by false security. Don't let your need for connection compromise your dignity. If we remain in a relationship where our dignity is routinely violated, our need for connection has outweighed our need to maintain our own dignity.

Don't just sit there and take it! Don't allow someone to violate your dignity without saying something. Stand up for yourself. Don't avoid confrontation. A violation is a signal that there is something in the relationship that needs to change.

Don't assume you are the innocent victim in a troubled relationship. Open yourself to the idea that you might be contributing to the problem. You may not be aware of it. We need to be able to look at ourselves from an outside perspective so that we can see ourselves as others see us.

Don't resist feedback from others. We often don't know what we don't know. We all have blind spots (ways that we unconsciously behave that are undignified). We need to overcome our self-protective instincts to resist constructive criticism and consider feedback as a growth opportunity.

Don't blame and shame others to deflect your guilt. Get control of the urge to defend yourself by trying to make others look bad.

Don't be lured by false intimacy. Beware of the tendency to connect with others by gossiping about someone else. Being critical and judgmental about others when they are not present can feel like a bonding experience and makes for engaging conversation, but it is harmful and undignified. If you want to create intimacy with others, speak the truth about yourself—about what is really happening in your inner world—and invite the other to do the same.

Driven by a desire to understand these human roots of conflict, and to use the knowledge to help parties address the extent to which assaults to their dignity were holding them back from achieving peace, my book was meant to address this profound source of human suffering in intractable international conflicts.

My goal for this paper is different. What I would like to explore is the extent to which knowledge of dignity—what I call *dignity consciousness*—contributes to our capacity to flourish as human beings.³ My starting point is at the other end of the spectrum from human suffering. I am interested now in the role dignity plays in increasing our capacity for loving human connections and how it contributes not only to our individual well-being, but to the well-being of others and the world around us.

What I hadn't fully appreciated when I started applying a dignity framing to conflicts people were experiencing, was the extent to which they felt a sense of inner peace when the wounds to their dignity were acknowledged and redressed. The aftereffects went way beyond resolving the

³ Donna Hicks, *Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People* (New Haven, CT: 2018).

conflicts. It helped illuminate the precious power each of them had within to experience a profound sense of well-being, love, and connection when their dignity was honored and when they honored it in others. The transformation in the relationships that took place went beyond my expectations. We all know that the first thing to go when we are in conflict with others is empathy.⁴ Through a mutual honoring of dignity, people were able to restore the natural empathy that had been lost during the conflict and could achieve an intimacy with one another that surprised not just me but them as well.

Taking it a step further, I now understand that dignity doesn't just embody human beings—it also extends to the natural world and whatever lies beyond. When we experience a connection to our own dignity, to the dignity of others, and to the dignity of something beyond the boundaries of ourselves, when all of those connections are in alignment, we have entered the realm of what George Valliant tells us is a spiritual experience.⁵

In his book, *Spiritual Evolution: How We Are Wired for Faith, Hope and Love*, George Valliant claims that “spirituality is the amalgam of the positive emotions that bind human beings and of our connection to ‘God’ as we may understand Him/Her.” We achieve such connection through the mutual experience of the positive emotions of love, joy, empathy, and compassion. He points out that these emotions all involve human connections and that they are expansive in nature, broadening our consciousness and awareness of others. They expand our tolerance, our moral compass, and our ability to see beyond our own viewpoint. Negative emotions—those that embroil people in conflict such as fear, anger, and resentment—narrow our focus and consciousness, closing us off to the perspectives of others and opportunities to grow and develop.

Barbara Frederickson, social neuroscientist and author of the book, *Love 2.0: Creating Happiness and Health in Moments of Connection*, agrees with George Valliant.⁶ Her research on the human body's reaction to the experience of shared positive emotions—or what she calls “positive resonance”—focuses on how we humans connect with each other and experience a feeling of love. She describes how in these moments of loving connection, our brains are in complete synchronicity; oxytocin, the hormone that is known to create a feeling of trust and safety with others is released; and our vagus nerve is active in calming us down and promoting a sense of inner tranquility. All this happens when two people have a momentary positive experience of love, joy, compassion, and connection with each other.

Frederickson thinks we need to upgrade our understanding of what love is, from a notion of what happens in enduring intimate relationships to one that recognizes how we have an opportunity, at any moment, to have such a loving connection with others if we so choose to initiate it.

If the experience of positive emotions is what defines a spiritual experience through loving connections, how do we get there? What ignites that connection? Here is where an understanding of dignity and the role it plays in our lives and relationships enters the picture. What better way of producing the positive resonance and connection with others than by honoring each other's

⁴ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009).

⁵ George E. Valliant, *Spiritual Evolution: How We Are Wired for Faith, Hope and Love* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008).

⁶ Barbara L. Frederickson, *Love 2.0: Creating Happiness and Health in Moments of Connection* (New York: Plume Books, 2014).

dignity? The chances of creating those spiritual moments of connection are maximized with an understanding of how to make others feel seen, heard, and accepted. Extending the Ten Elements of Dignity to others—putting them into action—is a fast track to the loving connections we all yearn for.

I am reminded of a quote by the Sufi poet, Rumi.⁷ He says: “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.” The truth about love and dignity is that we are hardwired to desire it.⁸ We crave human connection. If we were able to remove our barriers to love, then we would experience it without having to think about it.

One major obstacle is our ignorance of all things related to dignity. We are not born knowing how to act like we have dignity. We are, however, born with the capacity to learn. Only when we make the commitment to learn how to respect our own dignity and the dignity of others and the world around us, will we be capable of growing into the spiritual beings that we are all born to become. The stage will be set for our continued growth and development because we have finally recognized and accepted that we cannot flourish without loving human connections, and that respecting dignity is a prerequisite to such love.

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⁷ Coleman Barks. *The Essential Rumi*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

⁸ Maia Szalavitz and Bruce Perry. *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered*. New York: Harper, 2010.