

# ***Dignity: The Essential Role it Plays in Resolving Conflict***

## Book Summary

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This book reveals a hidden force within us so powerful that it can affect the way we feel about ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us. That force is our common human yearning to be seen and treated well. It underlies every human interaction, at all levels, all of the time. It is the unspoken and often unconscious message that we send to one another regardless of the nature of the relationship.

No one wants to be treated badly or to feel inferior. Yet, it is not uncommon to experience a violation of our dignity on a daily basis. It happens everywhere humans come in contact with one another: with our intimate partners and families, in our communities, schools, in the business world, and in our relationships at the international level. Dignity violations abound. And what is the cost of treating each other in undignified ways? It

is the paradoxical loss of our own dignity and the deeply satisfying experience of human connection.

We can no longer afford to ignore the consequence of the alienation and separation that dignity violations create. They give rise to the worst of what humans are capable of: violence, hatred, and revenge. The righteous indignation we feel when someone hurts us makes it easy to justify our own hurtful ways of “getting even.” This is how the endless spiral of indignity works—in a marriage, in the work place, as well as a war zone. On the other hand, treating each other with dignity has the power to connect us in a way that brings out the best in us, creating meaningful relationships and the opportunity for both personal and mutual growth and development.

Everyone desires dignity. I believe that along with our survival instincts, it is the single most powerful human force motivating our behavior. In some cases, I think it is even stronger than our desire for survival. People risk their lives to protect their honor and dignity all the time. You violate people’s dignity and

you get an instinctive reaction—people feel humiliated and get upset and angry. You violate people's dignity repeatedly and you'll get a divorce or a war or a revolution.

The desire for dignity is a powerful force and the time has come to recognize it and understand it. What is so critical to understand is this: *the experience of humiliation, resentment, and anger that these dignity violations instinctively create does not go away on its own.* The injuries are as serious as a gunshot wound, but no one is rushed into an emergency room when they happen. There is no 911 call for when we have been shamed, misunderstood, treated as invisible, or had our identity dishonored, to name just a few dignity assaults. These unattended injuries can fester in our inner worlds for a lifetime, severely affecting how we feel about ourselves as well as our capacity to be in relationship with others. They leave a vengeful and often crippling mark on peoples' souls and without attention paid to these injuries, they can linger on in perpetuity, dominating one's personal and group consciousness.

We have to take dignity seriously. *How we treat one another matters.* And it is as true at the international level of human interaction as it is in our daily interchanges with our loved ones and colleagues. When we violated each other's dignity, there are consequences because human beings have an instinct to react—often violently—to them.

My awareness of the power of dignity came during the last 20 years while I have worked as an international conflict resolution professional. I could see a yearning for dignity at the core of all the conflicts I had worked on over the years—Israel/Palestine, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Cambodia, the Balkans, US/Cuba, Northern Ireland, among others. When the political issues were stripped away, and the *human* experience of conflict was laid bare, what remained was a common yearning for dignity—to feel free from harm and worthy of being treated well.

We do not like to be treated badly, and especially do not like being humiliated by others. Our desire for revenge—an instinctive reaction to a dignity violation—only creates and perpetuates a

cycle of injuries that keeps conflicts alive. The problem is how do we get the cycle to stop? What do we have to do to address the dignity violations?

Using dignity as a lens for understanding conflict and the breakdown in relationships, no matter what level you wish to apply it to, requires some background knowledge. Having the insight that we all desire to be treated with dignity is not enough, but it is the starting point. Whenever I tell people that I am writing about dignity, there appears to be an instant recognition that creates a pause in the conversation. They look at me and shake their heads and say: “Yes. That is so important.”

We all have an intuitive understanding of what dignity means. That’s good because then we are all at the starting point together. But when I ask people to give me concrete examples of what dignity is, they look at me and say:

“Well, you know, it’s about wanting to feel good about yourself and wanting others to treat you with respect.”

Yes, I always say, but what exactly does it look like in our day-to-day interactions with people? How would you know if you were being treated with respect, or if you were treating someone else with respect?”

“Well, you know.....”

Then we usually end up laughing and I say:

“See, that is why I am writing about dignity. You know the gut feeling of what it is, but to describe what it would look like—to put dignity into practice and make it a *way of life*—that’s a different story.”

A colleague from Colombia once told of a conversation he had with an injured, young guerilla member, whose organization was fighting for political autonomy from the Colombian government. He told my friend that he was tired of fighting, that he wanted a different life. He was haunted by the number of people he had killed and did not want to do it anymore. He wanted to have a family and grow old. He wept with my friend. He wanted a way out but did not know how to go about it.

Although the predicament this young rebel was in is an extreme example, I think the essence of it rings true for many of us. If only we had a dignified way out of our conflicts with others. If only we knew how to save face and avoid the embarrassment of appearing “wrong” or having made a mistake.

Our self-preservation instincts, which are very strong, tell us that it is better to cover up the truth than to reveal it; we may look bad. And looking bad in the eyes of others is one of the most painful human experiences. The dreaded feeling of being publicly exposed before we are ready is as powerful a human force as any other. In this book, I explore the scientific explanation for why we resist this kind of humiliation. Evolutionary biologists know a lot about these deep drives that run so much of our behaviors—survival behaviors that we inherited from our early ancestors during the Pleistocene era. They also know that we are not doomed to be a slave to them. Fortunately, evolution has given us the power to find our way out of this predicament.

Finding the way out requires some focused attention on our part. It does not come to us in the form of a knee-jerk response. In fact, the answer is to hold that knee-jerk response (self-preservation) in abeyance so that another part of us can take over the decision-making; so that we can make a *choice* about how to respond to a threatening situation.

While our self-preservation instincts are very strong, (inciting destructive feelings of rage, revenge and righteous justification of the use of violence), we also have the power within us to make different choices about how we treat ourselves and one another.

*Dignity* makes the case that while a desire for dignity is part of our shared humanity, knowing how to honor dignity in ourselves and others is not. It has to be learned. Just as our understanding of science, mathematics, and all other intellectual capital does not come naturally, neither does our understanding of dignity. We need to work at it. Think of all the time and effort we put into our intellectual education—some of us extending our efforts for years in order to get advanced degrees. Why wouldn't



we put in the time to learn something that will surely benefit us every waking hour of our lives, improving how we feel about ourselves and the quality of our relationships?

*Dignity* provides readers with the basic information they need to harness the power of their dignity and to learn how to receive it and honor it in others. The book contains critical information about the human experience—from psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience—the latest information on what makes us tick as human beings and how that knowledge affects how we feel about ourselves and our relationships.

There is, however, a difference between learning about dignity and learning about science, mathematics and other intellectual pursuits. The difference is that learning about dignity makes us wise, not intelligent. We can gather information, facts and amass all kinds of intellectual knowledge and degrees but they will not necessarily give us dignity.

I think of wisdom as a kind of spiritual knowledge that helps us come to terms with some of the deeper questions about the

human experience: Who am I in relation to all things? What makes life meaningful? What is my purpose? How do I live my life in such a way that brings me both an abiding sense of inner peace along with the ability to be in relationship with others in a way that expands us both rather than diminishes us?

Dignity has an answer to these questions. While it addresses these bigger philosophical issues, it also has real, practical, day-to-day use. It is the medium of exchange for all matters related to human interactions. It is what makes relationships work and it is what makes us thrive as individuals. Knowing the fundamentals of dignity will prevent us from being thrown off by waves of negativity coming from people around us. At the same time, it prevents us from spewing negativity toward others when the tidal wave of resentment, revenge and righteous indignation wants to take us under.

This book offers an empowering strategy for finding the dignity we all yearn for. It takes an educational approach in that it provides readers with the basic information they need to put

dignity into practice. Part one introduces the *Essential Elements of Dignity*—ten concrete steps to take to honor the dignity of others. Part two describes the *Ten Temptations*—behaviors that we have to learn to keep in check so that we do not violate our own dignity. Part three explains how we can use the power of dignity to repair a broken relationship and promote reconciliation. The book is filled with stories that illustrate all of the above concepts. It serves as a field guide to the peace we want--peace within us, peace in our relationships, and peace in the safer and more humane world we all yearn for.

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