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Dignity's Depth and Breadth

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited by time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from that prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

– Albert Einstein

Every fall, I teach a three-day weekend course entitled “Healing and Reconciling Relationships in Conflict: A Dignity Approach” at the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City.¹ Students

across the university are eligible to take the course, including those who have graduated from the university and are interested in continuing their education.

At the start of the course, I always tell my students that they already know a lot about dignity, though the course will provide participants with a language and vocabulary for talking about it. The students are encouraged to share their experiences related to dignity, and they always provide deep insight. A student in one session in particular not only described her profound experience of dignity, but also helped all of us gain a broader perspective on it.

It was the first session of the course, and the group began as usual by coming up with a working definition of dignity. We had a long discussion about what it is and what it isn't, and many of the students shared some of their experiences of having their dignity honored and violated. Everyone joined in the discussion, except for one woman, Davie Floyd, a doctoral student. In her introduction, we learned that she was a business executive on career sabbatical to get her Ph.D. in human development. She studies how to foster the development of wisdom. She saw the course offering and was curious about what a dignity approach to conflict resolution would look like. She was silent for most of the first session. It was unusual that she didn't speak. Most students are eager to share their perspectives and experience.

When I was about to take a break before starting the second session, I saw her hand go up. I was beginning to wonder what was happening with her. Was she disappointed in the material? Did she disagree with what I was presenting? What was going through her mind? I was relieved to see that she was going to make a comment and couldn't wait to hear what she had to say.

Floyd began: "Donna, I have been sitting here listening very carefully to what you and the other students have been saying about dignity. I have not contributed because I wasn't sure about how I felt, but now I know. *I think dignity is much bigger than you think it is.* You have told us that it is our inherent value and worth. That's fine, but I think it extends far beyond just our personal value. I think dignity is given to all of us as a sacred trust. It is our job to take care of and protect it, because as you said, our dignity is vulnerable. We need to think of ourselves as the guardians of dignity, but not just our own. We need to protect it in all its manifestations, in ourselves, others, and the world around us. Dignity is really about life itself, and we are all responsible for it."

Everyone sat in silence. We were stunned. I was so taken aback that all I could say was "Wow!" We all looked at her in amazement, nodding in agreement, with big smiles on our faces.

Enlightened by Floyd's insight, I have concluded that dignity can be summed up in the following way: it is about *connection, connection, and connection* (the "three Cs").

"Knowing dignity" or "dignity consciousness" means that we are connected to our own dignity (the first C), the dignity of others (the second C), and the dignity of something greater than ourselves (the third C). The third C can take on different interpretations—for some, it can mean a connection to a higher power, but it also includes a connection to the natural world and the planet that is home to us all. Additionally, it can include a connection to a purpose that contributes to the greater good—something that gives meaning to our lives.

Since I have accepted this broader perspective on dignity, I have found that a severing of any one of the three connections is a source of emotional upheaval and suffering. If we are

concerned about only our own value and worth, and we fail to see the dignity of others and the world around us, we run the risk of behaving like narcissists. If we have a connection with our own and others' dignity, but we don't see the need to honor the dignity of the world we inhabit or pursue a life that contributes to the greater good, then we may suffer from a lack of meaning or purpose in our lives. This framing of dignity has helped many people see the source of their suffering and a way out of it.

As the earlier quotation by Einstein suggests, we are a part of the whole, but our ignorance of all matters related to dignity obscures the deeper connections that enable us to feel it. My husband, Rick Castino, helped me understand and experience the feeling of wholeness while we were on a trip celebrating his fiftieth birthday.

Rick loves fly fishing, and one of his favorite movies of all time is *A River Runs Through It*, a story of two brothers who spend quality time fishing in Montana. His wish for his birthday was to fish in the Gallatin River, where part of the movie had been filmed. I made all the arrangements, including finding him a river guide and a wonderful lodge for us to stay in with a majestic view of the Madison mountain range.

We arrived at the hotel after a long day of travel. We were in awe of the environment — neither of us had ever been to Montana. We got to our room, which had a lovely balcony looking directly at the mountain range. We walked out onto it; everywhere we looked was breathtaking. We stood there for a minute or two, looking straight ahead at the awe-inspiring view, and I said, "Doesn't this make you feel insignificant?" He turned to me with an incredulous look on his face and said, "Are you kidding? Insignificant? No — I feel a part of it."

What I missed when making the statement about my

insignificance in the face of the natural wonder was my own connection to dignity. Nothing should make us feel insignificant when we are connected to our inborn worth. We are all part of the wonder.

Why are the three Cs important to know for anyone trying to exercise leadership? Here's an example of how the three Cs were at play in an organization for which I was asked to conduct a dignity assessment.

A small organization that focused on immigrant issues in the United States was experiencing conflicts among its staff. The group worked tirelessly on injustices that immigrants faced in coming to the United States, doing excellent work and helping a lot of people who otherwise might not be able to afford legal services. All the employees were deeply committed to the work of the organization.

Some of the lawyers who argued the legal cases in court were older men who had been with the organization for many years. More recently, a few young women had been hired to help the legal team. The tensions had arisen between the older men and the young women lawyers. The women felt there were strong gender issues that needed to be addressed: men received the highest salaries as well as all the "perks" in the organization (for instance, they were assigned to argue the most exciting cases—those that received a lot of media attention). Some of the employees complained, too, that the workload was unfairly distributed. After some discussion, other discriminatory biases were exposed.

We determined that the following elements of dignity were being violated: *Identity* (the women felt like they were being treated differently because they were women); *Acknowledgment* (many of the people felt they suffered in silence, and no one drew attention to what they were going through); *Fair-*

ness (many felt there was a double standard around pay issues and work distribution); *Safety* (some of the employees did not feel safe to speak up when they felt their dignity was violated); and *Inclusion* (some felt left out of being considered for the more high-profile cases). It was even argued that all the elements were being violated at some point in time.

After the first day of introducing the Dignity Model to the group and articulating the dignity violations that people felt were at play in the organization, I started reflecting on how I would proceed with the second part of the work. I thought about the three Cs and realized that something fascinating was happening with the group.

I started thinking about the elements of dignity that they were trying to protect and preserve for the immigrants: *Identity* (as non-American people trying to enter the country); *Acknowledgment* (of their dire circumstances); *Fairness* (many were experiencing great injustices); *Safety* (most of them were not feeling safe and worried that at any moment they might be treated badly or even deported); and *Inclusion* (most immigrants did not experience a sense of belonging; on the contrary, they felt they lived on the margins of society). What I quickly realized was that *the very same elements of dignity that the organization's members were working righteously to protect for the immigrants, they were denying with respect to each other*. Inside the organization, they were mirroring the very violations against dignity that they were fiercely fighting on the outside.

From a three Cs perspective, they had the third C perfectly in alignment: they were working for something greater than themselves, which gave the organization its purpose and mission. Yet they were falling short on the first and second connections. Some of the staff didn't have a secure connec-

tion to their own worth. When I introduced the idea of Mandela consciousness (that dignity is in our hands alone and no one can take it away from us), many in the group admitted that they had never thought about it. The second C was also a problem because many of the employees were violating each other's dignity.

When I introduced the insight about "mirroring" to the organization, they were speechless. No one fought my interpretation. Instead, they seemed humbled by it. I held up a mirror for them, and they didn't look away. This was a remarkable group of committed individuals who wanted to create a better work environment and were willing to do what was necessary to improve their relationships with each other. The leadership team embraced the work I proposed for them. They practiced how to honor dignity, recognize when they were being lured by temptations, defend dignity (one's own and that of others), and take feedback from others. One person pointed out that even the third C, which they all related to, could improve if they got better at connecting with their own dignity and the dignity of others. To this day, the group continues to work on dignity issues inside the organization.

What made this intervention successful was that the leadership team was willing to have the mirror held up to them, even when doing so was uncomfortable. They understood their responsibility to be the guardians of dignity, of maintaining all three connections.

Dignity work is slow work, and it never ends. We all have times when we backslide, and fortunately, the Dignity Model has processes to address such times. I will describe these in detail in Part 3, but for now, the most important things to do in order to take responsibility for a dignity violation are, first, avoid pretending that it didn't happen (which is often a default

reaction); instead face the person you violated and say that you are sorry. And second, because saying you are sorry is not enough, let the person know that you will commit to changing your behavior. This second step will reassure the person you harmed and remind him or her that you are a work in progress, as everyone is.

The mirroring that happened in this organization is not unique. Many groups have been struck by how their organizations suffer from the same disconnect. It is not always the case that the third C is the one that is intact and the other two are not. I have consulted in places where the first and second connections are secure, but members of the group lack a sense of purpose or a connection to something greater than themselves. The three Cs can be used as an easy diagnostic tool to see where the disconnection is happening and how to address it. No matter what, it helps to illuminate the crucial role that dignity plays in clarifying our responsibility for the well-being of the whole community, whether that community is our family, workplace, neighborhood, country, or world at large.

