

The Worth and Dignity of Every Person

Edwin F. Taylor with Doris Hunter
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Each one of our summer services has a unique character that depends on those who lead it. Some services are poetic, others are conversational, still others bring a variety of rituals. I am an academic, so you are going to hear a short lecture on an important topic. At the end I will assign homework.

For a year I have been thinking about the First Principle of our church. Our First Principle is the Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person. I want to talk about this Principle in three settings: the family, our church, and the outside world of strangers.

Begin with the family. (If you are not currently in a family, think of your earlier family or the family in which you grew up.) In a close-knit family every one is treasured, everyone has worth. But in most of the world, dignity is not equally distributed in a family. Traditionally, the husband and father holds the dignified position. He treasures the [quote] little woman [unquote] for her many services and boasts about his cute children, but may not treat either as full persons.

I remember self-consciously trying to treat each of my young children as I would treat their grown-up self. This exercise felt very strange to me at the time. One day years ago, while we waited for a visitor to arrive at the Boston airport, my young son Lloyd started to walk away. Instead of calling him back, I followed him. He toddled on ahead, looked around to see me behind him, then continued his wanderings, glancing back at me periodically. Result: Exploration with dignity -- plus security.

Any tale of parenting has a BUT in it. My young children are persons, BUT it is my obligation to "walk behind" them, to keep them safe, and to prepare them to thrive in an often-unfriendly world. They have my love, BUT I must help them to develop their own discipline. We will find that the word BUT appears in most applications of the Worth and Dignity Principle.

For now skip over our church and move outward to the larger world.

I want to apply the Worth and Dignity Principle to strangers. Here are three examples to think about: racism, same-sex couples -- and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

First, racism. I grew up in Oberlin, Ohio. Oberlin College was the first originally white college to admit both women and African Americans – radical ideas at the time. The Civil War ended slavery, but Jim Crow followed. You do not have dignity when you cannot vote, when you have to ride in the back of the bus, and when you cannot send your children to a decent school. One great strength of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and other civil rights workers is that they behaved with dignity, they assumed the role that Jim Crow did not give them. Some people say, "You cannot legislate away prejudice." True, but rules and laws can support dignity.

49 Last Sunday Stefan Frank talked here on “The Power of Our Brain and How it Makes Equality
50 Difficult.” Stefan concluded that prejudice is almost impossible to overcome until we have
51 daily contact with a variety of individuals in the group against whom we are prejudiced. Few
52 of us live on a street with African American families, and few African Americans live on a
53 street with white families. Until that becomes common, public schools will not be truly
54 integrated. Until then, I fear, racism will remain the original sin and major unfinished social
55 business of our nation.

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57 Second, same-sex couples. Two lesbian couples live on our street. There used to be three
58 lesbian couples; the third couple occupied our rental apartment; they belonged to this church;
59 they had their dedication ceremony in our sanctuary. The now-married same-sex couples on
60 our street have had no adverse effect on the street’s heterosexual marriages; no divorces
61 have resulted from their presence as homeowners. Stefan Frank’s brain model may account
62 for the rapid public acceptance of same sex marriage; we live together on the same streets.
63 Your handout contains the final paragraph of Justice Anthony Kennedy’s majority ruling in the
64 same sex marriage case, with the word DIGNITY capitalized twice. Dignity can be part of the
65 justice system; worth -- the emotion of charity and acceptance – may have to come later.

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67 Third, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). I want to spend some time
68 meditating on my former employer, MIT. My co-author Edmund Bertschinger now holds a
69 new position at MIT called Institute Community and Equity Officer. He helps administrators
70 and departments to seek out the widest possible range of graduate students and new faculty,
71 to encourage their personal and professional development, and to advance and promote
72 faculty without regard to race, gender, or sexual preference. It is easy to see in his effort a
73 recognition of the worth and dignity of every person.

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75 Here comes that BUT again: MIT claims to be a world-class university, which by definition
76 makes it elitist. MIT wants the best students, the best faculty, the best staff. How can MIT’s
77 elitism be consistent with the Worth and Dignity of Every Person? I asked Ed Bertschinger
78 this question. Here is a summary of his reply:

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80 When you are at or near the top of the pyramid and you recognize your privilege, there are
81 three strikingly different ways you can respond to it: First, you can use your privilege to
82 benefit yourself. This is the substance of ambition. We’re not talking about ambition today, so
83 let’s ignore ambition as the first use of privilege. Second, you can reject and discard your
84 privilege. Third, you can use your privilege to help others. Let’s examine these last two. The
85 second way to respond to your privilege is to

86
87 Reject or discard your privilege

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89 This is a great tradition. Here are four examples of discarded privilege:

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91 1. Monks and nuns take an oath of poverty; they voluntarily move to the bottom of the
92 economic ladder, some of them do so to help the poor.

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94 2. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the devil took Jesus to a mountaintop and offered
95 him “all the kingdoms of the world.” Jesus could have been a powerful political leader, but he
96 rejected that ambition and chose instead to be a poor traveling preacher.

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98 3. The first three Gospels also tell us about the rich young ruler who asked Jesus how he
99 might achieve eternal life. Mark has a touching addition: Jesus loved this young man. Jesus
100 told him to sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, and come to follow Jesus. Millions
101 of Christians in the following two thousand years would have jumped at this opportunity.
102 Instead, the rich young man was “shocked” by Jesus’ invitation; he could not give up his
103 riches, and “went away grieving.” Jesus said to his disciples: “It is easier for a camel to go
104 through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” ROPE?
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106 4. The physicist Richard Feynman wanted to refuse the Nobel Prize, which he thought was
107 elitist. Someone told Feynman that rejecting the Nobel Prize would make him MUCH more
108 famous than if he accepted it. So he accepted it.

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110 So the second possible way to respond to your privilege is to discard it. A third possible
111 response to your privilege is to

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113 Use your power and privilege to reduce inequities

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115 Recognize that much injustice is not intentional, it’s just the way things work. For example, I
116 belong to the so-called old boy network. If you ask me to recommend a physicist for a faculty
117 position, I will almost certainly suggest a white male. That is natural for me; these are people
118 I know. As part of his task, Ed Bertschinger helps MIT departments to avoid the blindness –
119 which is my blindness – of the old boy network in finding graduate students and in locating
120 and promoting faculty.

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122 There is a BUT in MIT’s application of the Worth and Dignity Principle. On the one hand MIT
123 wants to promote diversity. BUT at its very core MIT wants to be the best. To do this it must
124 reward merit. Ed Bertschinger asks: What is merit? Is merit determined by standardized
125 testing? by number of publications? by subjective judgment? There’s the rub: the true nature
126 of merit is rarely clear. One of the achievements of Ed Bertschinger’s work at MIT may be a
127 richer understanding of merit and its application to graduate students and faculty.

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129 Now to our church:

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131 My year of meditating about the Worth and Dignity of Every Person has transformed my
132 understanding of our church. We are a community in which it is possible for Worth and
133 Dignity to have equal value. No BUTs. You in this room are not my fundamental responsibility.
134 None of you are my child, my parent, my employer, my employee, my business partner, my
135 teacher, or my student. We have the distance to treat each other with dignity. In addition, we
136 can appreciate and acknowledge each other’s worth. There is no BUT in our church
137 relationship.

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139 Worth and Dignity can coat every wheel of church functions: our church services, our coffee
140 hours, our social events, our committee work, as well as the outward-looking Social Action
141 Committee and our connection to the national UU Service Committee.

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143 Let’s ask a fundamental question: Where does our Principle of the Worth and Dignity of Every
144 Person come from? What is the bedrock on which it stands? In my opinion, that bedrock is
145 love. St. Paul’s ode to love, which will be our final responsive reading, comes close to a one-
146 word summary of both the Gospels and our First Principle.

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Then why bother with a First Principle; why not just extol love? Because “love” is mushy. The command to love your neighbor does not give any instructions. In contrast, the Principle of Worth and Dignity, can give practical advice: Does one of our church programs, or an existing national policy, enhance or detract from the worth and dignity of those affected? Our Worth and Dignity Principle gives structure to love, gives us practical advice about applying the rule of love. This leads to a slogan that you can carry away from the service today:

The Worth and Dignity Principle is the Swiss army knife of love.

A Swiss army knife does not carry every tool, but it can get a project started and make simple repairs. Similarly, you can use the Worth and Dignity Principle to plan a new project, to examine its progress, and to evaluate its final form. Your professional skills as doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief give you much more refined tools to evaluate the details, but you can pull the Worth and Dignity Principle out of your pocket at any time to check progress and to look at results. Here again is this morning’s slogan:

The Worth and Dignity Principle is the Swiss army knife of love.

This morning I have not talked about disagreeable and evil people: Does the Worth and Dignity Principle apply to wholesale murderers such as Hitler and Stalin? Nor have I discussed war . . . or capitalism. A helpful quote in your handout refers to capitalism; let it go at that. What do you expect in twenty minutes?

I promised you homework. Here it is. This church encourages you to celebrate the worth and dignity of every person. You are a person; therefore you have intrinsic worth and dignity. Jesus tells you to love your neighbor as yourself, which assumes that you love yourself. Number 6 in the Ten Temptations list in your handout reads, “Don’t allow someone to violate your dignity . . .” Your homework, then, has two parts:

First, remember our slogan: The Worth and Dignity Principle is the Swiss army knife of love. Second, apply the Worth and Dignity Principle to yourself.

[1994 words]

REFERENCES

1. *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, Donna Hicks, 2011, Yale University Press
2. Jesus tempted by the devil: Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13
3. The rich young ruler: Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30
4. This sermon posted at eftaylor.com/thoughts (or send Edwin an email at eftaylor@mit.edu)

HANDOUT, 30 August 2015

In the following quotes, the word DIGNITY has been capitalized.

From Justice Anthony Kennedy's ruling in Supreme Court same sex marriage case: Until the mid-20th century, same-sex intimacy long had been condemned as immoral by the state itself in most Western nations, a belief often embodied in the criminal law. For this reason, among others, many persons did not deem homosexuals to have DIGNITY in their own distinct identity. A truthful declaration by same-sex couples of what was in their hearts had to remain unspoken. Even when a greater awareness of the humanity and integrity of homosexual persons came in the period after World War II, the argument that gays and lesbians had a just claim to DIGNITY was in conflict with both law and widespread social conventions.

From the introduction of *The Good Jobs Strategy* by Seynep Ton:

There are companies in business today that have [what] I call the *good jobs strategy*. These companies provide jobs with decent pay, decent benefits, and stable work schedules. But more than that, these companies design jobs so that their employees can perform well and find meaning and DIGNITY in their work. These companies -- despite spending much more on labor than their competitors do in order to have a well-paid, well-trained, well-motivated workforce -- enjoy great success. Some are even spending all that extra money on labor *while competing to offer the lowest prices* -- and they pull it off with excellent profits and growth.

[I think Costco is one of the companies doing this.]

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1. *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, Donna Hicks, 2011, Yale University Press
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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS of DIGNITY¹

“Treat people as they want to be and you help them become what they are capable of being.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

- **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.
- **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
- **Acknowledgment**—Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating and responding to their concerns and what they have been through
- **Inclusion**—Make others feel that they belong at all levels of relationship (family, community, organization, nation)
- **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, that they feel free to speak without fear of retribution
- **Fairness**—Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way, according to agreed upon laws and rules
- **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
- **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
- **Benefit of the Doubt**—Treat people as trustworthy; start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.
- **Accountability**—Take responsibility for your actions; if you have violated the dignity of another, apologize; make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors

Donna Hicks
dhicks@wcfia.harvard.edu

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THE TEN TEMPTATIONS²

(How to maintain your dignity when your instincts think they know better)

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Don't shirk responsibility when you have violated the dignity of others.** Admit that you made a mistake and apologize for hurting them.
4. **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.
5. **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.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **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.
9. **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.
10. **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.