Dignity

DONNA HICKS

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She is the author of *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict* (2011), a best-selling book that was also the New England Book Festival's 2011 runner-up for best nonfiction title. Hicks and the subjects she discusses in *Dignity* have been featured on the BBC, *Fox News*, NPR, and radio stations across the country, as well as in *Psychology Today* and *Newsday*. The essay here, which focuses on the relationship between dignity and psychological safety, is excerpted from her book.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *How would you define dignity? Have you ever thought of it as playing a role in how you resolve conflicts with others? Consider a recent upheaval in your own life. Did dignity, as you've defined it here, play any role in how the conflict was resolved?*

> Put people at ease at two levels: physically, so they feel safe from bodily harm, and psychologically, so they feel safe from being humiliated.
>
> Help them to feel free to speak without fear of retribution.

My husband, Rick, and I were invited to the home of new friends for dinner to celebrate the seventh birthday of their youngest child, Seth (not his real name). When we pulled into the driveway, we saw about a dozen children playing soccer in their big backyard. The house and gardens were beautiful—our friends had spent time and effort on landscaping—and because it was such a warm night, they had decided to have the party outside. The dinner table was set underneath a huge maple tree strung with little white lights.

Before we got out of our car, we sat for a while watching the children play. Not able to have children ourselves, we both get a little wistful at times like these. After a minute, still staring at the children, my husband said, "They have it all, don't they?"

We joined the other adults on the patio. Our hosts, Margot and Tom (not their real names), gave us a warm welcome, then introduced us to the other guests, most of whom were the parents of Seth's friends.

When Margot announced that dinner was nearly ready, Rick and I volunteered to help bring the food outside. Seth came running into the kitchen, out of breath, unsuccessfully trying to hold back tears. Tom looked at him and said. "What's the matter? Why are you crying? You look like a baby."

Seth burst into tears and ran into his mother's arms. He told her that one of his friends had yelled at him in front of everybody because he had messed up a goal.

Tom said to Margot, "Don't baby him."

"What are you talking about? He's hurting."

Tom walked up to her and said, his face only inches from hers, "You have made him into a sissy. So what if his feelings are hurt? He needs to toughen up. He can't come running to you every time something goes wrong."

With her hands on her hips and her chest heaving, she said to Tom, "I'll tell you what's wrong; you're what's wrong. Don't you dare talk to me like that." Margot stormed out of the room.

Tom turned to Seth and said, "Get back out there with the other kids and stop being a mama's boy."

Seth left the room with his chin on his chest and with arm across his face, wiping away tears. Tom said to us with a nervous laugh, "A little shaming always works." He picked up a tray of food and headed for the patio.

Rick turned to me and said, "Never trust appearances."

This story shows what a violation of dignity's essential element of safety looks like. Specifically, Seth's psychological safety was at stake. Seth experienced a double hit. He was publicly humiliated when one of his friends yelled at him, in front of everybody, for not making a goal—which he must have felt bad about already. Having attention drawn to his mistake made flubbing the goal even worse, to the point where he bolted. Flight is a typical reaction to being humiliated, as we have seen. Seth fled into the house for consolation. But he did not get the nurturing and acknowledgment he needed. Instead, he was hit again. His father called him a sissy, and he did it in front of others. Humiliating someone in front of other people can be devastating.

When we are psychologically injured, the area of our brain that is activated is the same area that is activated when we experience a physical injury, as research by Naomi Eisenberger and Matthew Lieberman has

shown. We wouldn't think twice about rushing our child to an emergency room if he broke his arm or leg; the pain and suffering of a physical injury is acknowledged immediately. When his spirit is broken by shame or humiliation, when damage is done to his sense of worth, there was, in Seth's case, nowhere to go to take care of the wound. Running to his mother was his best option. But being told, as Seth was, to "be tough" and "stop being a mama's boy," makes it a fairly sure bet that the internal injury will grow and fester, contaminating his sense of worth. We humans need acknowledgment for what we have suffered, and when we don't get it, the temptation to think we deserved our misfortune comes naturally. Safety and vulnerability share a complex connection.

Listening to parents yell at each other also undermines a child's sense 15
of security, and it models undignified behavior. Sad to say, both parents felt justified in saying hurtful things to one another. Each felt the other was wrong. Our need to be right is a powerful motivation for inflicting psychological harm on another—for violating another's dignity. Righteous indignation is used to justify bad behavior all too frequently.

I once heard William Sloane Coffin, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, being interviewed on the radio. He said that self-righteousness was a scourge because it didn't leave room for self-criticism. In the heat of the moment, neither Tom nor Margot stopped to reflect on their own behavior. They were both overtaken by their fight instincts. Their Me's were in combat. Their reactions were so strong that the presence of other adults, who were not close friends, did not deter them.

Tom and Margot are not bad people. They have good intentions; they both want the best for their youngest child. But like so many of us, they are not aware of their blind spots—in this case, their instinctive violations of each other's dignity and the dignity of their child, especially under stressful circumstances.

What would it have looked like if Tom and Margot had handled their son's emergency with dignity? Margot was on the right track—she acknowledged how hurtful it was for Seth to be shamed in front of his friends. After the acknowledgment, she could have reminded him that he was a wonderful boy and that he shouldn't take his friend's outburst to mean that he himself had something wrong with him. His friend was upset because his team hadn't won the game, that's all. And Seth had missed a goal, which anyone could have done.

After she was sure that she had successfully helped Seth reinterpret the event, Margot could have encouraged him to go back out and play. She could have also encouraged him to go to his friend and say that he was sorry he had missed the goal—he had wanted to win the game, too.

Most people, young or old, respond positively to a comment like that. 20
It is a way to acknowledge the experience of the other, even the one who inflicted the wound. It is a way to say that the victim, too, has a perspective on the situation, one that he is capable of seeing now that he is no longer

hurting. A gesture of acknowledgment doesn't let the perpetrator off the hook, but it gives the victim a chance to regain his own wounded dignity and open up his perspective to include the experience of the other.

It would not be surprising to discover that Tom suffered crippling shame as a child. His father probably shamed him and told him to toughen up, too. This is how ignorance and the pain it causes get passed down like a dominant gene. Old childhood injuries create blind spots for us unless we get the help we need to recover from them.

Tom's blind spot was not being aware of how intolerable shaming can be to a child. He had dissociated pain from shame long ago to survive. A little education about how not to violate the dignity of children could have helped Tom, not only with his parenting but also with his self-knowledge. He could have understood the effects that extreme shame had on him when he was growing up. These early imprints of indignity—the memories of being painfully shamed early in childhood—continue to affect us and our dealings with others throughout our lives. Unless we become aware of them, heal from them, and make a conscious decision not to let them determine our actions, we continue to hurt others, jeopardizing their and our own dignity and threatening all our relationships.

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The early imprints of dignity and indignity have a profound effect on our developing understanding of our value and worth. During childhood, when we are vulnerable and dependent on others for our sense of well-being, we need our caretakers' ongoing love and attention to set the stage for the development of our fledgling dignity. If we experience the opposite—abuse and neglect in its myriad forms—we start our lives doubting our worth. Instead of developing a sense that we are good, valuable, loveable, and worthy, our inner world becomes dominated by a sense of inadequacy, badness, and fears of being defective. This primitive and childlike way of making meaning about ourselves becomes embedded and lasts into adulthood. Unless we do the work necessary to replace the childlike understanding of what happened to us early in our lives with an adult perspective on it, we can remain haunted by self-doubt and continue to feel uncertain of our worth.

The way we treat our children matters. Their brains are vulnerable to abuse and neglect because they are in a constant state of development. Bruce Perry, a specialist in child trauma who trained both as a psychiatrist and as a neuroscientist, has documented his findings of the effects of childhood trauma on brain development and the quality of life of abused and neglected children. He was one of the first researchers to debunk the myth that children are naturally resilient and bounce back no matter what they suffer. When undergoing treatment, traumatized children often used to

be medicated for depression or anxiety disorders, but what they had gone through was neglected. Perry has spent his career developing innovative treatment protocols informed by his knowledge of neuroscience and the effects trauma has on normal brain development. Admittedly, a majority of the children he has cared for suffered severe abuse and neglect—some were raped or witnessed the murder of a parent—but he tells us that from their experiences we can learn an enormous amount about the psychological needs of children in general.

Although most of us have not suffered such severe psychological trauma, most of us did experience wounds to our dignity during the psychologically formative years of our childhood. Because of pervasive ignorance about the fragility of humans' emotional worlds, few of us have developed an awareness of the lasting effects of the psychological harm done to us or of the psychological harm that we have done, especially to our own children, who need our care and loving attention. 25

Children's awareness of their worth begins with the way they are treated early on by their caretakers. If their dignity is violated more than it is honored, they will live in a constant state of doubt about their worth.

Let me be clear. When we are ignorant of the effects that our behavior has on others, and if our culture perpetuates and enables that ignorance, we will unknowingly do harm to one another. Even if we know that we are doing harm, in the absence of explicit societal norms to correct our behavior, we may continue to do harm. Because of this complex interaction of ignorance, denial, and societal taboos against discussing emotional trauma, it is no wonder that we have all experienced some kind of violation in our early lives. And it is no wonder that the caretakers who are responsible for violations of children's dignity are either unaware of the violations or are ignorant of how to nurture it.

What is important here is to know the dignity violations we experienced. To know them is to name them, to give them legitimacy and validation. And knowing them is the first step toward healing. The problem, as Jennifer Freyd points out, is our strong loyalty to our caretakers, especially if they are parents, which makes it difficult to view them as anything but good. Breaking through this loyalty is crucial if we want to get to do the healing necessary for us to recognize and accept the harm that was done to us and that distorts our understanding of our inherent worth.

The purpose of examining our early experiences is not to place blame or to make our caretakers feel bad. The purpose is to uncover the truth about what happened to us or, more the point, to uncover the untruth about our unworthiness.

Having an awareness of our early imprints of indignity enables us to identify vulnerabilities in our adult relationships. The early wounds set the stage for our relationships later in life. If we think of relationships as a source of pain (violations of our dignity) rather than a source of safety and comfort, we will have a hard time with intimacy. We become preoccupied 30

taken care of the internal wounds, they can even recall times that the perpetrators of violations treated them well. Those experiences were obscured by the overwhelmingly negative emotions that violations to our dignity create.

The negative power of unhealed wounds to out dignity can keep us in a frozen state of self-doubt, preventing us from accessing the positive power that is at our disposal once we see and accept our value and worth. We must tend to our dignity wounds if we want to grow and develop, if we want to abandon a self-protective stance in order to move forward and be open to creating relationships in which we feel safe.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. How does Hicks explain the relationship between dignity and safety? Why might she want to link dignity to a basic human need in this way?
2. Why do you think Hicks spends time creating an idyllic image of the party? How does the scene of relative comfort, happiness, and devotion abruptly shift? How is Seth first humiliated? How does Seth's father violate Seth's dignity? What is the difference between humiliation and a violation of dignity?
3. What role does Hicks suggest that narration—or storytelling—could play in helping us to "reinterpret" events (19) and process our feelings? How might Seth have benefited from such reinterpretation and reassurance of his safety?
4. How does Hicks reinforce the notion that physical pain and psychological pain are related? How does she also dispel the myth that kids are resilient? Why might she focus on childhood?
5. What effect does Hicks suggest our lack of adult understanding of the wounds we suffered as children can have on our treatment of others? On our own feelings of worth and validation? How have you seen this play out elsewhere?
6. Hicks makes important connections between how the indignity one has suffered affects both one's feelings of unworthiness and the indignities one goes on to perpetrate. What might she imply about our culture? Why might it be important to tie cultural action to individual actions in this way?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Pope Francis, in a 2015 General Audience address on the role of fathers, shared the following anecdote:

> Once I heard a father at a meeting on marriage say: "Sometimes I have to strike the children lightly . . . but never in the face so as not to humiliate them." How beautiful! He has a sense of dignity. He must punish, but he does it in a just way, and moves on.

This statement caused a media frenzy, with news outlets across the globe reporting that Pope Francis condoned spanking, or worse, child abuse. *Did* he condone child abuse? Do you think it's possible to physically punish a child while preserving his or her dignity? How might Hicks respond to this idea? What alternatives might she suggest?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Hicks argues that unexamined individual indignities create a culture of individuals who "become preoccupied with protecting ourselves from others . . . rather than connecting with them" (28). And she argues that this culture "enable[s] us to unconsciously justify hurting others" (29) and perpetuates the cycle of indignity on a personal and societal level. How might we use this theory to explain injustice or inequalities? Could it help to explain bigotry or discrimination? Are we as a culture in need of therapy? Spend some time thinking about the degree to which Hicks's assessment of individuals might be applicable to the social problems we face as a nation. Could we, for example, reframe personal and cultural narratives for those who show bigoted or discriminatory behavior? Write an exploratory essay considering one way to apply Hicks's assessment on a cultural level.
2. For many readers, Hicks's work offers a new way of thinking about the word "dignity." She considers what enables and disables dignity, what dignity means to our sense of self, and how a lack of dignity compels us to compensate. Do you think there are other words that we need to reconsider in terms of their effect on our self-worth? For example, Hicks suggests at least two other words that are misinterpreted or misapplied: "resilience" (mistaken notion that children don't register harm long-term) and "vulnerability" (mistaken as showing weakness). Can you think of others? Choose a quality that seems to be misunderstood or unfairly saddled with a negative association in our culture. Try to consider the effects of this misinterpretation on both individual experience and cultural understanding. Write a definitional essay that seeks to redefine the term in a more complete way. As Hicks does, offer real life examples as evidence.