

DIGNITY for ALL

How to Create
a World
Without Rankism



Robert W. Fuller and Pamela A. Gerloff

an excerpt from

***Dignity For All:
How to Create a World Without Rankism***

by Robert W. Fuller and Pamela A. Gerloff
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chapter one

Dignity: What Everybody Really Wants

Dignity. Isn't that what everybody really wants? You, me, your parents, your children, your friends, your colleagues at work: All of us want to be treated with dignity.

The homeless person in the park; the elderly in nursing homes; students, teachers, principals; Christians, Jews, Muslims; taxi drivers, store clerks, waiters, police officers; prisoners and guards; immigrants; doctors, patients, nurses; the poor, the wealthy, the middle class; big nations, small nations, people without a homeland.

Dignity. Everybody wants it, craves it, seeks it. People's whole lives change when they're treated with dignity—and when they're not.

Evan Ramsey, now serving a 210-year prison sentence for shooting and killing his high school principal and another student in Bethel, Alaska, told criminologist Susan Magestro:

"I was picked on seven hours a day every day and the teachers didn't do anything to help me...I told [my foster mother] and [my principal] more than a dozen times about all the bullying I was subjected to. They never did anything to help me....If I can prevent someone from having the experience I went through, I want to do that. I killed people.... Don't respond with violence even if you're

provoked. There's no hope for me now but there is hope for you."

—From "The Realities and Issues Facing Juveniles and Their Families,
The Warning Signs: Evan Ramsey—Bethel, Alaska,"
by Susan Magestro, www.susanmagestro.com

Fundamentally, dignity is about respect and value. It means treating yourself and others with respect just because you're alive on the planet. It's recognizing that you and everyone else have a right to be here, and that you belong. It means valuing your own and others' presence and special qualities. It means honoring who you are and what you have to offer. It means creating a culture in which it is safe for everyone to contribute their own gifts and talents.

Dignity. It's a need so strong that people will give up their freedom to have it met; an inner drive so insistent that it can move people to shocking acts of revenge when the attempt to achieve it is thwarted; a human value so critical to happiness and well-being that people sometimes value it more than life itself.

A Human Need Ignored

Yet this craving for dignity is so commonly overlooked that most of us accept undignified treatment as "just the way it is." As victims, we may wince inwardly, but we bite our tongues ("Who am I to protest?" "What good will it do?"). As perpetrators, we excuse our behavior ("I'm the boss, aren't I?" "He deserved it." "I'm just evening the score."). Or we ignore our nagging conscience, failing to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we are violating another's dignity.

Every day, we witness dignity scorned in our personal relationships, families, businesses, schools, healthcare facilities, religious institutions, and governmental bodies. Routinely, we fail to accord dignity to those we perceive to be the weaker among us. They may be the old, the young, the poor, the unknown, the infirm, the female, the darker colored, the jobless, the less skilled, or the less attractive.

Yet experiencing indignity at the hands of others is not limited to those at the bottom of the hierarchy—as the wealthy, the famous, and

the beautiful will attest. Anywhere and everywhere dignity is transgressed by others, with surprising regularity: A supervisor harasses an employee. A child taunts a classmate. A sports team hazes new members. A customer speaks rudely to a waitress. A teacher gives preferential treatment to a friend's child. An adult verbally abuses a child. An administrator fires a whistle-blower. A government official secretly circumvents the law. A prison guard torments an inmate. A dictator steals from the national treasury. A superpower pressures a smaller nation to commit to a loan that will damage its economy.

From intimate relationships to global relations, indignity is commonplace. Think of your own experiences: when have *you* not been treated with dignity? When have you failed to treat others with dignity?

So Why Are We Surprised?

If, every day, so many of us are not treated with the health-giving, life-affirming dignity we crave, then why are we so shocked when an employee “goes postal,” a teenager goes on a violent rampage, a mild-mannered woman explodes in anger at a seemingly small provocation, or global tensions escalate into international crises? Why do we habitu-

“The sense that you are nothing or nobody can drive you to violence and unreason. Through all human history it has been the hidden motive—that unbearable desire to prove oneself somebody—behind countless insanities and acts of violence.”

—John Fowles, author of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

ally fail to recognize, beneath the violent outbursts, the powerful impulse to lash out when a fundamental birthright has been denied: the right to be treated with dignity?

A Price to Pay

Of course, acts of revenge are never justified. But we ignore at great cost to ourselves and society the fundamental urge to be treated with dignity.

The consequences of violating others’ dignity are evident: in widespread social problems such as high rates of school dropout, prison incarceration,

violent crime, depression, suicide, divorce, and despair; in the business world in reduced creativity, lower productivity, or disloyalty to the organization. Even health and longevity are affected.

Dignity Not Yet Won

In 1775, American patriot Patrick Henry boldly declared, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Americans won their freedom, but more than two centuries later have not yet secured their dignity; nor has the rest of the world.

But that may be changing.

Today, the age-old cry for liberty appears to be morphing into a heartfelt cry for dignity. Worldwide, we see dignity-denying dictatorships transforming into democracies. In democratic elections, we see growing voter enthusiasm for candidates who offer a vision of dignity for all. If we look carefully, we can see in terrorist assaults the craving to be treated with dignity; and the spate of school shootings in recent years has led adults to counteract the devastating effects of bullying among children through school-sponsored anti-bullying programs. As overwhelming as the problem of indignity may seem, historically, humans have grown more tolerant and respectful as a species than we once were. Equal rights protections for people of different genders, skin colors, physical abilities, and sexual orientations are just some examples of progress toward greater dignity for all.

The time is ripe for dignity.

We Can Lead the Way

Each of us plays many different roles in life: we are parents, relatives, friends; we are employers and employees; we are participants in religious, school, or municipal governing bodies; we are citizens of the world in a community of nations. In each of these roles, we yearn to be treated with dignity, and in each of these roles, we have the opportunity to show what it looks and feels like to give dignified treatment to others.

We can begin to create a "dignitarian" world by simply asking ourselves: How can I help create a culture of dignity wherever I am?

- If we hope to ever live in peace with one another;
- if we wish to live in a world where people of differing opinions and

beliefs, differing experiences and cultures, differing languages, lifestyles, expectations, and aspirations can co-exist in harmony;

- if we aspire to realize the potential of our young people, our senior citizens, our work force, our political leadership;
- if we aim to harness the resources of talent, purpose, creativity, and joy lying right at our fingertips;
- if we dream of finding creative, life-affirming solutions to age-old problems,

then together, let us take the first step. Let us begin to acknowledge and respect the innate human yearning for dignity.

Let each of us lead the way.

Dignity as a Universal Right

This book is a beginning: it is a primer, a handbook, a manifesto. It aims to outline a pathway into a bold new world—a world where dignity is the norm, the natural and expected way of being; a world where violations of dignity are regarded as unacceptable; a world where, in the words of Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, “Dignity is not negotiable.” Since dignity is a basic human

“Dignity is not negotiable.”

—Vartan Gregorian, president of the
Carnegie Corporation of New York

need, dignity in a “dignitarian society” will be treated as both a human right and a responsibility. Dignified treatment will be just the way it is.

A Dignitarian World Emerging

What would such a world look like? What would home and family, school, work, religious, medical, social, political, environmental, and governmental life look like, sound like, feel like? How can we create such a vision? What steps can we take to get there?

Dignity for All provides a roadmap for a dignitarian world emerging. It is an invitation to journey to a new and tantalizing land, where a society that truly lives the value of dignity for all no longer asks the

question “Could such a world be possible?” The question asked instead is “How soon can we make it happen?”

KEY POINTS

- **Dignity is a basic human need. Therefore everyone has a right to be treated with dignity.**
- **People routinely violate others’ dignity, in large and small ways, throughout the world.**
- **When people’s dignity is not respected, negative feelings and unhealthy consequences result, for individuals and society.**
- **If we want to achieve our potential, we must make dignity a primary value.**
- **Each of us can help build a dignitarian world.**

Small Acts: The Power of “I’m Sorry”

“I was waiting in line. A young guy about 20 was at the counter buying stamps. Suddenly some ratty, crazed-looking man who was ahead of me in line started screaming obscenities at the young guy. Young Guy turned around and said, ‘What? What did I do?’ to the livid man, who screamed back, ‘You KNOW what you’re doing!’ like he was sensing evil rays coming out of Young Guy’s forehead or something.

Young Guy kept saying ‘What?’ and then he just stood there. Everyone in the room froze up. It was extremely tense. Then Young Guy, in an apparent moment of inspiration, said simply to the crazed man, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disrespect you.’

That comment was like a pin deflating the man’s anger. He completely calmed down and backed off, because he felt he had his dignity back.”

—Claire S.

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