

**An Appreciative Frame:
Beginning a Dialogue on Human Dignity and Humiliation**

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None of us is as smart as all of us.
Japanese Proverb

How do we begin a dialogue about the impact of humiliation on human dignity? Until recently, the consequences of humiliation were largely overlooked by researchers, neglected by scholars, denied by political leaders, and discounted by individuals and groups at all levels of society. Yet, because of the collective efforts of individuals like those attending this meeting, more and more people are beginning to understand that humiliation is a fundamental mechanism in human relations (Lindner, 2001), a mechanism that disrupts and damages interpersonal, social, and international interactions around the world.

Indeed, daily media images of degrading armed conflict and dehumanizing cruelty have led many of us to agree with Evelin Lindner's assessment of humiliation as "the nuclear bomb of emotions," an experience that poisons individuals, families, communities, and whole societies for untold generations. In 2003, Evelin invited a number of us to join her remarkable efforts to "map the [ever-changing] minefield" of this experience at the first international meeting of the *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network* (HumanDHS) in Paris. Again this year, Evelin's vision has drawn together a unique interdisciplinary-international group of scholars and activists who share the belief that encouraging human dignity in the lives and work of *all* people requires moving beyond practices that threaten or inflict humiliation.

But how do we begin our conversation together? How do we create the optimal conditions that will allow us to tap into the rich diversity of knowledge and experience that each person brings to this meeting? In particular, how do we, as explorers of the experience of humiliation, "walk our talk" in the process? How do we ensure that our energy goes into our work together? Over the last few years, it has become clear to the core members of this group that *it is not just work that we do together that is important, it is how we work together* that strengthens our shared efforts.

In 2003, Don Klein, author of several groundbreaking papers on the humiliation dynamic (Klein, 1991a, 1991b, 1992), introduced us to a "frame" that we have found to be a highly useful starting point for our meetings. This is the frame of "appreciative inquiry" (Klein, 2004; see also Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990). Within this frame, participants are invited to co-create a context of mutual openness, mutual empathy, and curiosity. Don has observed that:

Everyone is born with an inherent capacity to experience the world through the lens of wonderment and awe. We have the potential to view events in our lives with simple clarity, to maintain a sense of humor and joyful perspective, and, above all, to avoid wasting energy on distracting thoughts, including the fear of humiliation. (Klein, 2004, p. 4).

This distinctive frame encourages us to fully appreciate the challenge of our topic, to appreciate the different perspectives each of us brings to the conversation, and to appreciate and cultivate the conditions that create a *humiliation-free* working/learning environment.

However, an appreciative approach should not be confused with behaviors that might be described as “just being nice” or with contriving ways to agree with other members of the group. It is not about forcing oneself to be positive, to think optimistically, or even to exert effort to reframe the messages that others present. Furthermore, it is not about competitive debate or avoiding conflict. *It is about being present and engaged in a way that values and encourages the contributions of all members of the group.* When differences arise, it is about practicing radical respect by being empathic, curious, and connected to gain clearer understanding of others, with or without agreement (see “waging good conflict,” Miller, 1983, 1986). It is about approaching new information, new ideas, and new insights from a position of humility.

What does the practice of appreciative inquiry look like? Reflecting on the strengths of our past meetings, I continue to shape and adjust an evolving list of specific actions that seem to be the most helpful:

1. Practicing relational-cultural awareness:

- Meeting others in mutual respect (rather than making them earn it).
- Being mindful of one’s intended and unintended impact on others (Jordan, 1995).
- Appreciating that each member of the group is connecting across differences in language, culture, disciplines, interests, experiences, and many other differences that can make dialogue rich *and* challenging.
- Being attuned to time and timing by checking agreements about the meeting schedule throughout the program.

2. Listening each other into voice:

- The process of listening and speaking is bidirectional; we can literally listen each other into voice. That is, all participants can respectfully help others find ways to clearly express their ideas.
- Creating a context of collective curiosity and collaboration.

3. Waging good conflict

- Disagreeing without being disagreeable, without contempt or disrespect.
- Questioning what’s wrong with being wrong. Sometimes acknowledging that one is wrong is the pathway to a new insight (Miller, 2003).
- When in doubt, asking for feedback.
- When needed, practicing the power of apology (Lazare, 2004).

4. Creating better connection through reflection

- In addition to reflecting on *what* has been collectively accomplished, reflecting on *how* this work has been accomplished as the meeting progresses.
- Being responsive to each other and making adjustments to various aspects of the meeting as needed.
- Acknowledging and honoring individual and shared efforts to foster an appreciative, humiliation-free learning environment.
- Joining with others as active partners and co-creators of the meeting experience.

5. Taking our work seriously, but taking ourselves lightly.

- Employing humor to laugh with each other is always encouraged and encouraging.

What are the some of the possible outcomes of an appreciative approach? Based on the successes of past HumanDHS meetings, I would like to think that we would continue to find ourselves moving toward mutually beneficial, humiliation-free, growth-fostering relating. Research and clinical practice at the *Jean Baker Miller Training Institute* suggests that growth-fostering relating is characterized by mutuality, authentic engagement and communication, zest, mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, greater knowledge and clarity, greater sense of worth, and a desire for more connection (Hartling *et al.*, 2003; Jordan, 1986, 1997; Jordan *et al.*, 1991; Jordan *et al.*, 2004; Miller, 1986b; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This is a type of relating that strengthens the work as well as all of the people involved.

The frame of appreciative inquiry offers us a relational space for acquainting ourselves with new people and new ideas. It is a way of optimizing our efforts and honoring our need for each other. We need the collective wisdom and knowledge of many people to address the pervasive forms of humiliation that threaten the dignity of individuals, groups, and nations around the world. “For,” as Virginia Woolf reminds us, “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind every voice,” (Woolf, 1929, p. 65). And, as the Japanese proverb suggests, “None of us is as smart of as all of us,” none of us is as strong or as capable as all of us who contribute to this effort. When we take an appreciative approach in our work together—and perhaps in our work in the world—we are encouraging human dignity and simultaneously working against the dynamics of humiliation. We are walking our talk.

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