

DIGNITY, HUMILIATION, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
by Brian D'Agostino

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"The Nature of Dignity and the Dignity of Nature," a conference co-sponsored by the Morton Deutch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution with Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS), was held at Columbia University Teachers College on December 7th and 8th 2017. HumanDHS co-founders Linda Hartling and Evelin Lindner convened the event. Its entire proceedings were video-taped and are posted at: www.humiliationstudies.org

A unique feature of this annual meeting, the fourteenth one at Columbia, was the opportunity for all participants to process ideas and information collaboratively by formulating discussion topics, breaking into dialogue groups, and then reporting summaries from each group to the whole conference. Four topics were selected on the first day: "How to Reach the Unreachable About the Marginalized," "Education for Dignity," "How to 'Do' Dignity—Dignity As a Verb," and "Ageism Goes Both Ways!" There were also poetry readings, movement, and music, including a performance by Fred Ellis and his students.

Evelin Lindner presented on themes from her book *Honor, Humiliation and Terror: an Explosive Mix and How We Can Defuse It With Dignity*. She noted that from the origins of homo sapiens around 200,000 years ago, the primary mechanism of ultimate conflict resolution was migration by one party to the conflict. Building on political anthropologist Robert Carneiro's work, Lindner highlights the role of "circumscription," the scarcity of fertile land relative to population, which eventually gave conflict no outlet except the domination of some groups by others. Under these dominator societies of the past five percent of homo sapiens' history, the ruling elites monopolize honor and impose humiliation on the ruled.

Against this backdrop, Lindner sees the democratic and human rights revolutions of the 18th century as a major turning point in human history where the masses of ordinary people increasingly reject humiliation and expect to be treated with equal dignity. In our own day, the dynamics of humiliation and dignity are key to understanding the motivation of terrorist movements and destructive conflicts of all kinds. Creating social and political arrangements from the local to the global scales that recognize the dignity of every individual is both possible, and necessary for creating a viable future.

Psychologist and psychohistorian Michael Britton's featured presentation, "We are the Carriers of the Better Possible Future," explored the interplay between humanity's neurobiological heritage, the current global crisis, and prospects for the future. He delineated two instinctual clusters, one negative—centered on predatory and domination behaviors—and the other positive—centered on attachment and nurturing. Superimposed on these hardwired brain functions, which humans share with many other animals, are the distinctively human mental/neural capacities—foresight, inventiveness, and empathy beyond one's own community.

Our current political/economic paradigm, featuring nations in the service of a predatory supranational industrial/financial system, gives expression to the negative cluster.

Under this paradigm, plutocratic elites aggressively plunder Earth's resources while creating dead end trash zones in which destructive human and ecological consequences are disproportionately imposed on women, the poor, and people of color. The physical aspects of this system can be viewed as an externalization of toxic psychological dynamics (e.g. resource hoarding as a mirror of esteem hoarding).

Michael analyzed industrial practices that have already taken earth's resource systems outside the bounds that can support human life as we know it and argued that we are having to heal structural inequities (centuries/millennia in the making) in the midst of this eco-catastrophe. Our divided, rapacious and hostility-prone world must pull together and concentrate on restoring the integrity of earth's life systems if any of us is to enjoy a humane existence. He noted a number of promising grassroots initiatives such as worker cooperatives that indicate the possibility of a just and sustainable future.

Law professor Michael L. Perlin, a pioneer in the field of Therapeutic Jurisprudence, and public defender Alexander J. Perlin discussed how marijuana arrest patterns perpetuate a racist criminal justice system that humiliates minority youth. Therapeutic Jurisprudence, by contrast, makes psychological health a desired outcome of legal systems. Cognitive social psychologist Claudia Cohen's presentation "Dignity as a Practice: The Nonhuman Rights Project" argued that our treatment of animals, as co-inhabitants of Planet Earth, should serve as an opportunity to strengthen our relational "practice" of Dignity. Prof. Tony Gaskew reflected on the metaphysical nature of justice, namely how the profound interconnectedness of all humans and life means that every action has consequences that come back to the actor.

Fonkem Achankeng I, an African traditional leader, conflict resolution scholar, and editor of *Nationalism and Intra-State Conflicts in the Postcolonial World* (Lexington Books, 2015), discussed the persistence of colonial arrangements in the developing world with special reference to Cameroon, a postcolonial state currently at war. Entitled "Imperial Dispossession of 'Others' by the Falsification of Dignity," this presentation asked why some ex-colonies have been placed in a situation of eternal humiliation.

In her presentation, "Climate Catastrophe and Political Discourse," Janet Gerson argued that the term "climate change" grossly understates the catastrophic nature of the threat facing humanity, which must be called by its proper name. She discussed the need for a participatory and inter-subjective model of climate justice that recognizes the dignity of every person. Sasha Moore, author of training materials on transgender issues for law enforcement personnel, spoke about the role of ignorance in perpetuating law enforcement practices that humiliate citizens and the difference that appropriate training can make.

Literary theorist and social researcher Zuzana Luckay Mihalčinová, an organizer of the upcoming Vienna Week of Dignity Conference, shared her presentation time with Katha Schinking and Martin Rohlathe, Directrice and owner respectively of Habibi and Hawara. This collaboratively managed restaurant in Vienna, which features a fusion of Middle Eastern

and Austrian cuisine, was discussed as a prototype of economically self-sustaining enterprise that can create dignity and livelihoods for international refugees. Law professor David C. Yamada, known for his work advancing workplace bullying legislation, spoke about the International Society for Therapeutic Jurisprudence, launched in July 2017 in Prague by attorneys and law professors mostly from the US, Europe, and Australia. Prof. Yamada is the founding board chairperson of the organization.

Danielle Coon, Associate Director of Columbia's International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, challenged the social construction of wilderness spaces as a domain for privileged white males. She cited Carolyn Finney's book *Black Faces, White Spaces* and discussed the Baden-Powell Service Association, a traditional scouting movement that is inclusive. Organizational psychologist Philip Brown, Director of the New Jersey Center for Character Education and author of *Student Discipline: A Prosocial Perspective*, discussed human dignity principles that should inform schools, and showed a video clip of an evidence-based practice for creating schools that embody such principles.

Doaa Rashed, Director of University of Maryland's (Baltimore County) Masters Program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, spoke about practices that express ethnic identity and her work creating cross cultural and international learning experiences. Finally, Theravada Buddhist monk, religion scholar, and educator Bhante Revata Chipamong Chowdhury discussed simple but powerful mindfulness exercises for cultivating dignity that are suitable for both adults and children.

The conference concluded with dialogue groups on "Restorative Justice and Forgiveness," "Dignity, Technology and Evolution," "Transforming Power Abuse into Dignity," and "Can Dignity Become a Constitutional Right?"

Brian D'Agostino, Ph.D. is an educator, researcher, and the author of numerous publications on political psychology and public affairs including The Middle Class Fights Back: How Progressive Movements Can Restore Democracy in America. He is Communications Director of the International Psychohistorical Association and Editor of Psychohistory News. Brian can be reached at bdagostino2687@gmail.com.



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