

One handle for grasping Am.'s current cultural crisis is marked "Dignity." We're in a crisis of dignity. Most of us have a pretty good feel for what it is. Certainly it includes self-respect, self-regard, in all relations & situations a sense of self-worth ("dignity" being Latin for worth, "worth" being OHG for the dignity of being worthy & thus valuable). It's something the present US Dept. of Education secretary is finding everywhere in high-achieving public schools among the so-called disadvantaged--so it's something that transcends turf, though turf may predispose for or against dignity. Well, that's a good place to begin this Thinksheet's list of completed generic stems: "Dignity derives from...."

1. Achievement, as in the case of the children mentioned above. One essential for the healthy society is that the citizenry have adequate opportunity to achieve & thus to reap the harvest thereof in dignity, the dignity of self-satisfaction & social recognition. A society is sick to the extent to which such opportunity does not exist.

2. Freedom, decisional power over one's life--one's time & potential. Without social regulation ("socialism" of some kind), this freedom--and attendant dignity--will exist only for those of high gifts, high energy, & high drive (ambition). Society will be sick, for few will have freedom-dignity & achievement-dignity. But the flipside is that society will be sick if the state coops everybody's decisional power: the state will have coercive dignity, the citizenry will live without freedom-dignity, in subjection, in fear, in virtual or actual slavery. NB: Under any ideology, a prison is, by this definition, a sick society, which therefore in doublespeak is called a "correctional institution" parallel with calling homosexuals "gay." One argument for capital punishment is that, on this angle, it has more dignity than has imprisonment: the criminal may die with dignity instead of being forced to live in indignity. The counterargument that life under any conditions is better than death demeans humanity; it's mere vitalism, as appears also in technomedical sustaining of life in the brain-dead.

2. Divine origin. Life has dignity, acc. to our Declar. of Independence, because we are "endowed by our Creator with life...." It's an anomaly that now (winter '87) the Supreme Court is hearing public-school cases in which "creation scientists" are claiming it's OK to teach c.s. because it's to be done without reference to, or even the implication of, the dignity motif in the Declar. of Independence! At the bedrock of the Founding Fathers' moral vision was this sanction of divine origin, and it's silly & insane that government schools--pledged to continue & promote the Am. heritage--are forbidden to engender this motivation. Secularistic efforts to marginalize this sanction in our founding documents, as though it were as peripheral as the embroidery on the Founding Fathers' shirtcuffs, are disingenuous, pernicious, & at the moral level of Soviet historical revisionism.

3. Loyalty. Well, maybe there's no always happiness in lying in the bed you made, but there's dignity in it. Dignity in "My word is as good as my bond." Dignity in keeping covenant, fulfilling contract, being faithful in relationship, not making promises with convenient mental reservations. No, loyalty isn't everything. My point is that "Dignity derives from (among other things) loyalty, which is hanging in there by will-power when self-aggrandizement seems to lie in becoming disloyal. In the Bible (& so in Judaism & Christianity), loyalty is the heart of religious & sexual commitments--cult-code-creed, and marriage (not "love" or "intimacy," which are to be bound by and nurtured in marriage--on which see the splendid feature article, "Intimacy: Our Latest Sexual Fantasy," by Tim Stafford, in the 16Jan87 CHRISTIANITY TODAY).

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In biblical religion, human dignity is derivative rather than inherent. Only God's dignity is inherent. As also only God's goodness: "Only God is good" (Mt.19.17, M.10.19, L.18.20).

4. Discipline, the prophylactic/pedagogic/punitive removal of freedom. Ends & means: If dignity is the end, then freedom (as in #2) is merely a means to dignity & (as here in #4) should be denied when the interests of dignity supervene. But if freedom is the end, as in permissivism, discipline is an attack on dignity--the main argument used by libertarian forces (ACLU et al) in battles against the public-school use of fear & physical pain (seen thus as forms of "child abuse"--overlooking the fact that the underdisciplined classroom is a time-delay form of child-&-society abuse)....Outside the sphere of this Thinksheet is the means/end criterion applied to dignity itself. In biblical religion dignity is instrumental to devotion, "holy living"&"holy dying" (as Jeremy Taylor, scholar-saint, put it), which is instrumental to "the glory of God." But all this is way beyond the allowed sanctional range in Am. public schools. It's a severe problem, though, that to stop with dignity, and not go on to devotion and "the glory of God," is to overweight Renaissance-Enlightenment values over against biblical values; far from teaching the Bible in the public schools, it is teaching ANTI-Bible in the public schools (parallel with anti-Bible teaching in the public schools of the USSR). The myth that our public schools are neutral on religion is promoted by those whose religion, viz humanism, is being taught, without competition, in our public schools.

5. Integrity, active respect for truth & honesty in word & deed in one's living & relating. You feel good about yourself, have dignity, if you pay up when you're tempted to cheat on truth, honesty, relations, possessions. Eg, integrity-dignity requires that you treat with DISrespect what you see, in others feelings & ideas & actions, as lacking dignity. This is (1) the only form of disrespect that dignity permits, and (2) a disrespect that dignity requires. I have found that obeying the dictate of this integrity-required disrespect reduces the number of one's friends to the point where they do not overimpose on one's time and energy; friendship becomes a manageable factor in day-to-day living.

6. Divine suffering & human self-offering for redemptive suffering. A specifically biblical root of dignity, this. In Judaism, but heightened in Christianity as (a) "Christ died for me" and (b) "Take up your cross & follow me." Mother Teresa knows about this dignity, but it's undervalued in USA "mainline" religion.

7. "Participation in the Holy Spirit." For Christians, this is a community dignity. Immanu-el, God is with us in the Jesus community of caring-with-God for "the saints" & "the world." Only this can deliver the local church from being only a religious club.

8. Heritage. In addition to horsethieves, everybody's family tree has saints and near-saints on it. And then--why not?--tribal & racial & ethnic pride, contributing to dignity if tamed by continuous awareness of the pan-human context of all claiming & celebrating. Theologizing that's cerebral & abstract poopoos this concreteness, but the Bible unabashedly revels in it. Why not? But the taboos should include the other-one's-nose limitation on my provincial pride & promotion.

9. Recognition. "I matter," my sense that (a) my existence is recognized and (b) my contribution is appreciated, is a sine qua non of dignity. A church that fails to do this for folks is doing nothing significant for the Kingdom of God. Or a school. Or any other institution. The social cost of letting people live with "I don't matter" is horrendous.

10. Loving/being loved/sharing/blossoming. Dignity is in the laborer, not in the labor. On Cape Cod we have right now (a) many unemployed because the work available is "beneath their dignity," and (b) many Brazilians taking the jobs, who understand that dignity is not in the labor but in the laborer--and are blossoming!