

Dignity, Peace and Harmony

Evelin Lindner, 2014

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Human relationships are rapidly changing today. During the past millennia, in most parts of the world, it was generally accepted that some people were born *high* and others born *low*. Relationships were characterised by the relentless ranking of human worthiness. Systems of domination and submission were the norm. This is called the *dominator model* of society (Eisler, 1988). Today, global information sharing and the emergence of human rights ideals bring about radical change. The dominator model loses its normative authority, and it also loses its feasibility in practice. Applying domination and exploitation in an interdependent world of finite resources proves counterproductive, at least in the long run, even for the dominators themselves.

Humankind is beginning to see the value of respecting all human beings as *equal* in worthiness rather than as *unequal*. And also our natural environments are being included. All around the world, people attempt to move away from domination toward *non-domination* (Pettit, 1997), toward *partnership* (Eisler) among ourselves and with nature.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” this is the first sentence of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. This sentence speaks of all human beings, not only of French or American citizens or only of rich people. It expresses that we, the human family on planet Earth, no longer wish to live as a divided family, and it invites all human beings into *one single* family. This sentence also makes clear that it is not just dignity, but *equality in dignity* that is the issue. The sentence states that all members in this united family are *equal* in dignity. Humiliation is felt when this family membership is being denied.

In the English language, the verb *to humiliate* had a prosocial meaning until 1757. It was generally accepted that

superiors showed inferiors their proper place in the social order by exposing them to humiliation. This ranged from rigid hierarchical seating orders to beating and torturing. It was in an English encyclopaedia in 1757 that for the first time the verb *to humiliate* was described as an antisocial act, as the violation of a person's dignity (Miller, 1993).

Also dignity and respect were once part and parcel of the traditional ranking system. *Dignitaries* used to throw their weight around and expected to be respected for their alleged superiority. What is expected now is *mutual respect for equality in dignity for all*. Dignity and respect have acquired a new connotation, namely, that we, as humankind, unite and hold hands in respecting and nurturing the richness of our social and biological diversity.

Other concepts change meaning now as well, including peace and harmony, and reconciliation and conflict resolution. Keeping fearful underlings down with an iron fist produces the "peace and order" of a terror system. Tyrants like to speak of peace and harmony when everybody is quiet. Authoritarian regimes request the world to respect their national honour, dignity, and sovereignty. Today, many people will disagree. Peace and harmony are now seen to be attainable only through dialogue among equals. And the honour and dignity of sovereignty is not to be abused for covering up for terror. This is why phrases such as dignity and respect, or peace and harmony, or reconciliation and conflict resolution, if used alone and unqualified, do not suffice to describe the new worldview.

Being *united in equal dignity for all* produces a new kind of peace and harmony, and a new kind of reconciliation and conflict resolution. These new kinds flow from social and ecological sustainability and replenishment, nurtured in a global partnership of care by the entire human family. In the new context, it is no longer feasible for masters to employ

humiliation to create humble underlings. Humiliation is now experienced as an undeserved and unjust violation of dignity. Humiliation no longer produces humility; it now triggers opposition and rage. This rage may turn inward and lead to apathy and depression; it may also lead to open violence. Humility no longer flows from meek submission, but is now restraint that is intentionally chosen.

All around the world, subordinates who formerly were submissive and bowed to humiliation, are now rebelling against their assigned subservient status in the social order. Humankind is in the process of moving from traditional arrangements of ranked honour to a new vision of human dignity. It is a move away from oppression and submission in a divided family, toward a family that unites globally in cherishing its diversity, be it social or ecological diversity. It is a move toward global *unity in diversity*, away from local *uniformity in division*.

This is why the phenomenon of humiliation has become so much more significant than before. Humiliation in its many forms—such as disrespect, denigration, derision, or dehumanisation—becomes a much more powerful force in creating feelings of humiliation. These feelings, in turn, have the potential to break down relationships and lead to violence (Lindner, 2006). Based on twenty years of global research, feelings of humiliation could therefore be aptly understood as the *nuclear bomb of the emotions* (Hartling, Lindner, Spalthoff, & Britton, 2013; Lindner, Hartling, Spalthoff, & Britton, 2012)

Unfortunately, up till now, world-wide, we have not yet succeeded to unite in equal dignity. Domination is still rampant. Too many psychological and cultural scripts all around the world, too many practices, policies, and institutions, still induce and intensify humiliating domination. What is particularly dangerous is a new form of domination, a form that

is so covert that it is misrecognised by many people. Domination is now maximised under the cloak of freedom rhetoric. The trap is hidden in the misguided definition of freedom, namely, freedom for might to be right. This definition leads to domination rather than partnership. A growing influence of corporate interests now threatens the emergence of a true partnership model. Ruthless self-serving individual achievement and cutthroat competition are being promoted world-wide, rather than long-term sustainable collaboration. As a result, nature's systems increasingly break down and people's social and psychological resilience falters.

Yet, it does not have to be this way. From all continents we hear voices urging us to manifest true partnership. From South America, we hear Paulo Freire's plea for *critical consciousness*. His colleague Clodomir de Moraes made us aware that we need more, namely, *organisational and systemic consciousness*. In Africa, Nelson Mandela attempted to show how we might bring about constructive systemic change. From the Middle East, Avishai Margalit (1996) calls on us to create a *decent society*, a society that does not humiliate its citizens. In Russia, Leo Semashko reflects on the best ways for shaping such a decent world.

In Nazi Germany, many followed Adolf Hitler into the perpetration of mayhem. Others were passive bystanders (Staub, 1989). Yet, some people stood *up* rather than *by* and became rescuers. Stéphane Frédéric Hessel was born in 1917. He was a French wartime resistance hero. He cried out against Nazism in the 1940s. Now, he cries out "against the complicity between politicians and economic and financial powers" and calls on us to "defend our democratic rights" (Hessel, 2010).

Today, the rescuer is you, the reader of this book, the citizen of this world, the member of the human family. Your first responsibility is to stop pinning your hopes on strong leaders.

No longer do we wish strong leaders to topple tyrants only to become the new tyrants themselves. The very systems of domination need to be dismantled and new systems of caring partnership co-created, by all of us. Most of us have been socialized into domination/submission scripts. To become responsible members of our global family, we must overcome these scripts also in our own psyches, in our own ways of communicating with each other, and in the ways we shape our visions for a better future. As our ecological and social resources are hollowed out, more people must wake up and work for constructive change in the dignified and dignifying spirit of a Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

It is clear that humankind is moving through dramatic relational changes, as well as facing dire political, economic and environmental challenges to our existence. To address these daunting challenges, our ways of thinking and shaping our world also need to change. This means, among others, that we need to create constructive conflict where it is necessary, rather than being divided by artificial conflicts or bowing to dominator definitions of dignity, honour, respect, sovereignty, freedom, peace and harmony. It means working for mutually supportive global systems of care that bring people together in equal dignity and help us protect our planet. If we are to survive as a human species, we must develop systems of unity in diversity that invite everyone's best contributions of knowledge, creativity, and wisdom. The world needs new models of living together that dignify the lives of all people, of our relationships with each other and our relationship with a fragile planet.

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