

Democracy and Dignity

By Michael Britton, 2024

The pursuit of dignity has been shadowed by the realities of humiliation, so writes Evelin Lindner, founder of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies network (<https://www.humiliationstudies.org/>), a global association of practitioners, scholars and therapists united by the shared belief that humiliation undercuts relationships on all levels of life, makes solving problems of any kind infinitely harder, and is a prime igniter of violence in marriages, in international relationships and everything in between. Until 1757, The Oxford English Dictionary viewed 'humiliation' in the context of societies organized around fixed ranks, determined by heredity with the few at the top having the power, the unquestioned authority and indeed the duty to keep everyone below them 'in their place,' making decisions any time they felt so inclined that shaped everyone else's lives, upended their existence, sent them to prison without trial, and so on. Humiliation meant disciplining those who forgot their place, humbling them, reminding them of their true status in life as inferiors. In 1757, that had been changing enough for the dictionary to recognize a revolutionary attitude toward all of this had become something of a ground swell. People now experienced being humiliated as abusive, an assault on their humanness, a violation of their innate dignity as human beings, a wrong done to them that should cease. A shift from absolute rule to democracy was underway, a revolution in the common understanding of who decided what one's life would be about, who had rights, who could hold their head up in the presence of anyone, who had rights before the law and in court. A profound moral change was underway.

Democracy recognizes that writing, making, and enforcing laws is an enormous power that can threaten dignity or defend it against abuse justified by the old order that decided who counted and who did not, whose lives and basic needs mattered, and whose experience in life should count in the shaping of law, whose voices held sway and whose were not heard in the making of the legal order. Democracy also meant that anyone could aspire to hold office in the grand enterprise of making law and establishing how it was to be enforced. Liberating as this has been

for so many, it also greatly widened the competition for position, power and wealth — which is also to say the competition for dignity. Democracy has been that as much as anything else, a competition over dignity in which, in theory, everyone could pursue their own interests and try to persuade everyone else that those interests should take on the force of law, democracy as arguing in pursuit of some measure of agreement. Democracy has been shadowed by humiliation, resentment, the growth of corporate power over life, and the resurgence of defiance that gravitates to rule by defiant strong figures who will take society once again in hand, the will of the people overruled. All of this plays out as the countervailing force to another very large step in the pursuit of universal dignity that is in progress, the idea that all lives matter, everyone's dignity matters, everyone's living experience needs to be known, considered important, and so protected rather than ignored or violated by law. This is the compassion revolution. Universal dignity is made workable, livable, by universal compassion. Everyone who did not count has a life situation and a life experience that moves us to want them to live in dignity. And every time this takes place, dignity grows and democracy's aspiration to leave a life of organized pride and humiliation behind comes closer to reality. With that reality the felt need for revolution, for violence, for power grabs, recedes; when it is resisted, urges for power and voice through violence grow.

The very concept underlying democracy is in play. From a struggling over whose voice will gain traction and become law, democracy is coming to be universal compassion that serves universal dignity. We are all in this together and we help each other through. The psychology of arguing is giving way, but there is a further step possible. In the edited volume *The Gift Economy*, Jeannette Armstrong gives voice to the way the Sylix people of western Canada have maintained their sense of being a community.¹ In the midst of controversy, it is the responsibility of each person, not to persuade others of their own position, but to enter into the position most opposite to their own and to understand how that position might be a contribution to the collective understanding of how best to go forward as a society. This is a

¹ Vaughan, Geneviève (Ed.) (2007). *Women and the gift economy: A radically different worldview is possible*. Toronto: Innanna Publications. www.gift-economy.com/womenand.html.

practice that secures democracy in a way it has not been secured to date. In addition, they believe the voices of the minority are most important to be heard as they usually have a very different experience and perspective from the rest. A leader is one who hears what everyone is experiencing, knows what everyone is feeling and thinking, and can put it all together and give voice to that in such a way that everyone feels “yes, that’s it” and so can go forward together. Democracy that widens its lens to listening to everyone within society requires a psychology capable of listening to everyone outside one’s own society to gather what can be learned that would help “us” do better together. We, the modern, can learn from the non-modern and indigenous how better to be us on our own enterprise to become the democracy that compassion will create as we leave behind the ways of absolute power, endless struggles over voice and power, and the humiliation that has showed our journey to the universal right to a life of dignity.

Michael Britton, New Jersey, July 24, 2024